

The Paths We Choose

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Naruto becomes the villain everyone in the village always thought he would be. Only one person will risk everything to try and redeem him. His best and most loyal friend, Uchiha Sasuke.

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Iruka's words

Author's Notes: I really do need to stop doing this. This story is a response to a challenge from 'A Triumverate of Rei' to write a story where Naruto is the bad guy and Sasuke the good guy. Any of you who are familiar with my stories know just *how* challenging that is likely to be for me. I have a rough idea about the pairings but I'll save them for later.

In the forest near the village hidden in the leaves a desperate battle was being fought that would affect the destiny not only of Konoha but of all the elemental lands. This battle was ostensibly being fought over the ownership of a precious scroll filled with forbidden jutsus. But though none of the participants realized it there was something even more precious at stake.

The heart and soul of one particular boy.

Two bodies collided in the air and both slammed into the ground below. One figure with a scar across his nose grunted in pain. "How did you know?" There was a puff of smoke, and the figure was revealed to be Mizuki. "How did you know I wasn't Iruka?"

A blond haired boy in an orange jumpsuit panted and managed a rough smile. There was a puff of smoke and the boy was revealed to be the real Iruka. "Because I am."

"I see," Mizuki slowly came to his feet and took out a massive shuriken from his back. Iruka also tried to get up, but the many wounds suffered earlier were too much and he remained where he was.

"I would have let you go, but you deliberately sacrificed yourself to let the brat escape. Why?"

"Because I refuse to let a traitor like you have the scroll!"

Mizuki laughed. "So instead you'd rather let that monster have it instead? The monster that killed your parents?"

Though neither of them knew it the real Naruto was only about ten yards away hidden behind a large tree. He had the scroll he'd been tricked into stealing and could hear every word.

"There's no way that demon fox wouldn't use the power of the scroll you know."

"Yeah, that's true," Iruka admitted.

Nearby Naruto felt his heart break, the kind words his sensei had spoken just a moment before... they were a lie. *He... he hates me too! They all hate me!*

"But..."

"Sorry Iruka, I need to find the boy and don't have time to waste." Mizuki threw his shuriken.

From his hiding spot Naruto heard the, 'thwunk' as the weapon hit its target. He heard the last cry of pain that signaled the end of Iruka-sensei. That Iruka might have said more had he been given the chance to never occurred to Naruto, he was certain his final words had shown how he'd really felt. *I'm glad he's dead! Naruto thought viciously. Everyone hates me! Everyone but the old man. At least now I know why. So I have the Kyuubi inside me huh? Good! Then I really will have the power I need to make them all sorry!*

In that moment Naruto made a decision that would have terrible consequences. He decided that he no longer wanted people to acknowledge or respect him. He wanted revenge for everything he had been forced to suffer.

He stood up and deliberately walked around to the other side of the tree he was hiding behind.

Mizuki looked up in surprise as he yanked out his weapon from Iruka's corpse. "So, you figured out you couldn't get away and decided to just give up? That's the smartest thing you could have done. Give me the scroll and I'll let you go."

"Liar," Naruto spat. "You're just like all the rest of them. You all hate me for something that was never my fault."

Mizuki laughed a bit and carefully hefted the shuriken. "Well that's true, but whether it's your fault or not doesn't really matter. You are the demon fox, that's all that counts."

"That's fine," he said and formed the ram sign. "If we're enemies no matter what then I'll just kill you."

"You kill me?!" Mizuki laughed again and took aim. "I'd like to see you try."

Naruto performed the hand signs he had studied with such desperate energy the last few hours. " **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu.**" Smoke filled the entire area. When it cleared there were two hundred clones surrounding Mizuki.

"What?! This is impossible!"

All, the Naruto's grinned as just one spoke in a low voice. "Is anything impossible for me? I am the Kyuubi after all."

Like a wave the clones rushed forward. Mizuki beat off the first dozen but was soon overwhelmed and dragged down.

The original Naruto remained calmly in place as his clones beat Mizuki to death.

Miles away in the Tower the Third Hokage watched the scene play out. Saw Iruka's tragic end as a terrified Naruto was hidden nearby. Then witnessed Naruto come out of hiding to avenge his teacher's death. Sarutobi was surprised to see Naruto capable of such power. He was saddened to see him lose all self control, but could understand it given the circumstances and the betrayal he'd just undergone. He had missed Naruto's final words to Mizuki. If he had heard them he would have been even more worried. As it was things were bad enough.

He sent word to his ANBU to escort Naruto and the scroll to him and to recover Mizuki's body.

A short time later a sullen and quiet Naruto was in his office. Physically the boy was fine. Emotionally? Who could guess?

"Naruto, I want you to tell me what happened." Sarutobi said quietly. There was no reason for him to reveal what he had witnessed.

Naruto nodded and began to tell him everything, starting from the conversation with Mizuki where he had been duped into stealing the scroll. He told Sarutobi everything that had happened but was careful not to reveal his thoughts.

At the end Sarutobi just stared back at the boy sadly. No, there was no way Naruto could be blamed for anything that had happened tonight. Students were taught to trust in their senseis, Mizuki alone was responsible for this night's tragedy.

"You must have a lot of questions Naruto," Sarutobi finally said. "You can ask me anything you want."

"What Mizuki said, was it true?"

Sarutobi slowly nodded. "Yes Naruto I am afraid it is, in order to preserve the village the Fourth Hokage had to use a special seal to lock the Kyuubi into a newborn child. You were that child. That seal

that appears on your belly whenever you mild chakra is proof of that. The Yondaime knew the sacrifice you would be required to make, his final wish was that you be seen as a hero."

"A hero?" Naruto said bitterly. "That didn't quite work out did it? People have treated me like garbage all my life and I never even knew why. Well, at least now I know." He looked at the old Hokage questioningly. "Does everyone know?"

"No, shortly after you were born I passed a special law that those who knew the truth could not speak of it to any who did not. I did that with the specific hope that you would be able to have normal friendships with others of your own generation."

"So you mean all the kids in my class hate me just because?" He actually laughed a little. "I don't know if that's better or worse than the ones who hate me for what I have inside me."

"Is it really that bad Naruto? I always thought you had at least a few friends among your classmates."

Naruto gave a vigorous shake of his head. "Some of them are less mean than others and just mostly leave me alone. But I don't have a single friend, not one. I tried, I really did, but none of them ever wanted to be friends with me."

I should have paid closer attention, Sarutobi thought. He could guess the reason; likely most of the parents had poisoned their children against him. Either deliberately or not the children had picked up the attitudes of their parents.

"What's going to happen to me old man? Am I in trouble for stealing the scroll?"

"No," Sarutobi said in a firm voice. "You were the unwitting pawn of Mizuki's. When you did realize the truth you acted exactly as a ninja should in eliminating a traitor and returning the scroll. In essence Naruto you successfully completed a B-rank mission, I intend to

have that placed in your record and have you paid in accordance." The old man finally smiled. "I also intend to promote you to Genin for your actions." He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a shiny new hitai-ite. "Here Naruto, take it, you've certainly earned it."

Naruto reached out and took the metal and cloth headband. "So... so I get to be a ninja after all?"

"You certainly do Naruto."

"Thank you old man!" Naruto leapt onto the Hokage and hugged him with all his might.

Sarutobi looked down at Naruto's honest joy and whatever lingering doubts had been left were dispersed.

You're the only one old man! You're the only one who's been good to me and I'll never forget it! I'll make you proud of me I swear it.

And where Sarutobi could not see Naruto had a cold smile very different from the ones he was known for. *And I'll make everyone else in this village sorry. I swear that too!*

Meeting sensei

After talking to the Hokage he went home and crashed at his dirty little apartment. He was trying to sort through everything in his mind and in his heart. In just one day his entire world had been torn apart.

He'd failed the graduation test, been given hope by Mizuki, successfully stolen the forbidden scroll, mastered the kage bunshin no jutsu, been rescued from Mizuki by Iruka, been told the truth about what was inside of him, heard Iruka admit he really cared about him, heard Iruka admit he really didn't, heard Iruka die, killed Mizuki, and finally been promoted by the old man.

It had been a pretty busy day.

He removed the hitai-ite that was around his forehead so he could look at it. It was just cloth connected to a thin sheet of metal with the leaf symbol stamped on it. It was probably only worth 500 ryu, if that. But the moment he'd received it, it had become his single most precious possession. He wouldn't trade this for a mountain of gold.

The Third Hokage gave this to me; he said I'd earned it. I'm really a ninja now. A serious look crossed his face as he thought about that. That's right, I'm a ninja now. I can't act like a kid anymore. No more dumb pranks, no more pleading for attention, or whining about how things aren't fair. I have to stop fooling around and be really serious about things. That's the only way I'll reach my dreams.

He had two dreams now. One was to make the old man really proud of him. The other was to become Hokage and make every last person in this village kneel down before him. *To hell with making them acknowledge me, I'll make them worship me instead. I'll make them fear me and obey my every command.* He smiled wickedly there in his darkened room. *After all, I **am** the Kyuubi right? The most powerful being to ever walk this earth? I'll make them worship me even if they do all hate me.*

When he fell asleep that night he had a dream.

He found himself in the forest again. There in the clearing he found the bodies of Iruka and Mizuki, the latter was almost unrecognizable. He also had the scroll again. Standing there a voice called to him from the dark woods.

" You did good kid, much better than I'd have ever expected."

"Who's there?" Naruto called out fearfully.

The figure walked out of the darkness and into the clear pale moonlight. **"Well I'm you, and the Kyuubi. But you're the Kyuubi right?"** The other Naruto laughed as if it were the funniest joke in the world. He was an exact copy of Naruto, except that his eyes were red and slitted.

"What are you? A clone?"

" I told you what I am, I'm the Kyuubi. And since *you're* the Kyuubi I must be part of you right?"

Looking closely at his other self he couldn't help but feel dread creeping over him. There was something scary about this clone, and it wasn't just the red eyes. He wanted to run away, he wanted to get as far away as he could as fast as he could. But he stamped down hard on that feeling, ninjas didn't run away and they didn't get scared!

"If you're me you know what happened and what I plan to do."

The other Naruto nodded gleefully. **"I sure do kid, and I'm here to help! You want power? I'll give you power, and I'll help you to your goal."**

Naruto frowned suspiciously. "If you're really a part of me why do you keep saying 'you' and calling me a kid? I hate that."

" Must be because I've been asleep so long that I haven't fully integrated with you yet," The other Naruto said smoothly. **"The important thing is that I represent all the Kyuubi's power and knowledge. I can help you; all you need to do is listen to my advice."**

Naruto wasn't sure just what to make of this other self, but he was willing to at least listen. "What's your advice?"

" First, you need to keep our knowing each other a secret. You've seen how much people hate you just for being the Kyuubi. If they find out that you've gained access to the Kyuubi's full power and knowledge they'll kill you."

Naruto shivered. He'd been badly beaten many times as a child and been chased by angry mobs. It was not hard to imagine the people taking that last step and actually killing him. "All right, but how can you help me if I can't use your power?"

" Put a frog in a boiling pot and he will jump out. But put him in a warm pot and raise the heat a bit at a time and he'll stay until he's cooked." The other Naruto smiled wickedly. **"Starting tomorrow you'll have a MAJOR boost in the amount of chakra you can use, and I'll keep increasing it a bit at a time. Your healing and stamina are already quite advanced; I'll boost your physical strength and agility too. Your senses will all be sharper, especially your sense of smell. I'll also help you with your memory."** Here the other Naruto sighed with impatience. **"I can't transplant my memories to you, and anyway there isn't much there that would be useful to a human. But from here on out you won't forget things, anything you see even once you'll remember. So learn everything you can and pay attention. You can use your clones to learn even faster. Whatever your clones experience you'll remember."** He nodded to the scroll the true

Naruto was holding. **"You can start by studying that while you sleep."**

"Huh? But why? I already learned the kage bunshin."

" Idiot!" he growled. **"There are a dozen jutsus on that scroll, all of them A or S ranked. Have you forgotten you unrolled it and looked at all of them?"**

"Of course not! I wound up studying the kage bunshin because the rest were even more impossible to figure out."

" Anything I see even once I remember. That scroll is an exact copy of the real one. While you sleep you can learn those jutsus. Even if it takes awhile they will prove immensely useful to you."

Naruto looked at the large scroll with sudden interest. Some of those other jutsus looked really intriguing. Especially the exploding clone and divine wind techniques.

" Now one last thing, don't reveal yourself to them yet. You're not strong enough."

"What do you mean?"

" I mean play the happy idiot a while longer, at least until you're powerful enough to stop wearing masks. You can drop the pranks and the constant need for attention, people will expect you to be more serious now that you're considered an adult. But continue to smile and pretending you still care what others think."

Grudgingly Naruto nodded, his late unlamented teacher Iruka had often told them that deception was the lifeblood of ninja. He'd survived up until now by wearing a cheerful mask. He supposed he could keep wearing it.

The next day Naruto took his photo for the ninja registry and had a short meeting with the Hokage afterwards. As he was leaving a little kid ran in shouting something about attacking the Hokage just before tripping over his own feet. Not caring he left quickly. He found an empty piece of ground and spent most of the day using his clones to practice taijutsu.

The day after he skipped breakfast and reported to the academy one last time to receive his team assignment.

Walking into the classroom he picked up an excited buzz from the others. They were all eagerly talking to one another about their hopes for the future. No one bothered to come up to him. Climbing the steps Shikamaru finally noticed him.

"Naruto, what are you doing here? Class today is only for the students who actually passed."

His immediate instinct was to ask the jerk if he was blind and lazy. Instead though he gave the other boy a wide smile and tapped his hitai-ite. "See for yourself, I did pass."

Shikamaru lifted an eyebrow, then grunted and put his head back down, apparently saying anything more would be too troublesome.

Naruto found an empty seat on the aisle and sat down. He noted who the other person sitting in the section was and promptly ignored him. About a minute later there was a shout from the doorway and two high pitched voices began to shrill an argument about who had got there first. Naruto looked at the two girls; he dismissed the rude blonde and focused on the equally rude pink haired girl.

Just two days ago his heart would have been racing right now and he'd have been gathering up his courage to try asking her out... again. Though his heart still ached a little he'd decided he would not waste any more time with her. He had treated her as well as he knew how to, and in return she had never even given him *one* kind word. Even if she had no interest in ever dating him she could have at least

done that much. *Well after today I won't have to deal with her anymore*, he glanced down the table, *or the gloomy princess either*.

"Move Naruto! I want to sit next to Sasuke!" Sakura screeched at him.

He gave her a wide smile and scooted his chair forward. "Sure Sakura-chan."

She didn't spare him even a look. She just sat down in the middle seat and immediately began telling her uppity prince how wonderful he was.

As usual Mr. Personality ignored her.

Looking at the scene he couldn't help but feel a little jealous. Sasuke had everything he'd ever wanted and seemed to make a point of showing people that none of it mattered to him. *The bastard should at least appreciate how lucky he is*.

Sasuke noticed his staring and deemed him worthy of a questioning glance. Naruto sent him a huge smile and Sasuke promptly ignored him again.

After awhile Gekko Hayate entered the classroom with a clipboard. He was another of the teachers and familiar to all of them. "Please," cough "Settle down everyone. I," cough cough "Will be the one assigning you to your teams and senseis."

Naruto noticed he didn't say a word about why he was here doing this instead of Iruka or Mizuki. A few students wondered aloud about that, but no one thought it important enough to actually ask about. Most were just excited to find out where they were being assigned and with whom.

Naruto didn't notice it, but a shy girl in the back row was looking over at him and pressing her fingers together. She was hoping she would end up on a team with him.

As Hayate named the teams and the various senseis Naruto found himself listening as excitedly as anyone else.

"Team seven," Hayate said. "Uzumaki Naruto," Naruto looked up eagerly. "Haruno Sakura," Sakura slumped in her seat and let out a moan. Naruto glanced at her coldly but otherwise did not react. "And Uchiha Sasuke, your Jonin instructor will be Hatake Kakashi."

Both Naruto and Sasuke remained outwardly unaffected. Sakura jumped up and shouted with joy even as most of the other girls looked on jealously. "Oh yeah! I'm with Sasuke-kun!" The two boys sent her identical looks of annoyance, when they saw they were mirroring each other they both looked away again.

I really am kami's chew toy aren't I? Naruto thought glumly. This was the worst possible combination for him. He was stuck with the superior jerk who thought the whole village was beneath him and with his former crush who would obviously side against him in everything. *Anything* else would be better, even being stuck with loud vain Ino, or the lazy idiot, or the rude kid with the puppy. He knew complaining now would do no good. He thought about going to talk to the Hokage later, but immediately dumped the idea. He couldn't keep running to the old man for help. If he was really going to make the old man proud he needed to start handling things on his own. *I guess I'll just have to suck it up and deal with it.*

"All right," Hayate said once the teams were all listed. "You are now free for the next hour so go have lunch. Be back in one hour's time to meet your senseis."

Naruto left immediately to go get some ramen at his favorite place. He knew Sasuke would have no interest in eating with his new teammates and that Sakura would want to eat alone with Sasuke. Neither of them noticed or cared as he left.

Coming back from Ichiraku's Naruto was surprised to see Sakura out in the courtyard. He was even more surprised when she spotted him and hurried up to greet him.

For a second, just one second, he felt hope flutter to life in his heart. Maybe now that they were teammates she would accept him as a friend and comrade. Getting even that much from her would make him very happy.

But the second she opened her mouth her angry tone killed his momentary hope. "Hey Naruto-baka I want to talk to you!"

"What about Sakura?" He said in a cold flat voice. Since no one else was around he decided to dump the mask for a bit.

The girl actually blinked and did a double take. "What did you say to me?" She barked.

He crossed his arms over his chest and gave his former crush a hard look. "I asked you what you wanted to talk to me about. Whatever it is just go ahead and tell me I don't want to be late for meeting our sensei."

She stared at him not believing his reaction. He was always loud and annoying and trying to come between her and Sasuke. Where the hell had this sudden attitude come from? "I... I want you to know that I'm going to be with Sasuke. Don't get in my way or I'll make you regret it." She'd spent the entire lunch period eating alone hoping Sasuke would come over and talk to her. He'd actually passed by a couple minutes ago; he'd gone right past her without so much as a word. Obviously winning his love would be hard, but she was determined to do it no matter what! And part of that was making sure Naruto-baka didn't get in the way.

Naruto stood there and looked at her. Sakura imagined the air around her was suddenly chilly and rubbed her arms. "You know Sakura; I never realized how loud and annoying you were."

"Wha... what?" She spat out.

He walked past her. "Lunch is over, don't be late."

She stood there rooted to the spot staring at his back as Naruto walked away from her. It seemed as though the idiot had finally figured out he had no chance with her. She knew she should have been happy. Without his interference things with her and Sasuke would go much more smoothly. Yet somehow hearing Naruto be so cold to her... it hurt, just a little.

She shook her head angrily. *What the hell am I thinking? I'm glad Naruto doesn't like me anymore! Sasuke is all that matters!* She marched back to class and tried to forget that weird feeling of sadness.

They were the last ones in the classroom.

All the other senseis had been waiting there to collect their teams when lunch ended. Two hours later though team seven was still waiting.

They were all sitting in different rows, about as far apart as possible. Naruto had deliberately picked a different seat when he returned. Sakura had sat beside Sasuke of course, but as soon as the room had emptied he had turned to her and asked her to give him some room.

At that point she wouldn't have minded too much if Naruto had wanted to talk to her a little, but he'd remained as silent as Sasuke. She sent a curious glance his way. Since when was Naruto like this? He'd always been filled with compliments, always eager to tell her she was pretty or smelled nice or that she was smart. Why had he suddenly stopped?

When he noticed her looking at him he deliberately looked away.

Sighing she looked back up at the clock. They'd spent the last 40 minutes sitting her in silence waiting. Looking at how apart they all were she suddenly wondered just what sort of team they were going to be.

Two hours after all the other teams had gone Hatake Kakashi slid open the classroom door and popped his head in. Three young faces turned to look at him. A dark haired boy looked utterly disinterested. A blond was trying to smile but was clearly hiding his anger. A pink haired girl made no effort to hide her own anger.

"You're late!" She shouted.

Ignoring her he nodded to them. "All right team seven meet me on the roof in two minutes." He vanished before them in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Two minutes later he was facing his students on the academy rooftop. They were all staring back at him silently.

"Hmmm, my first impression, you seem a little hostile."

"That's because you kept us waiting two whole hours!" Sakura shouted. "Why were you so late?"

Beneath his mask Kakashi smiled. "Oh, I would have been here on time but a black cat kept crossing my path."

Sakura's jaw dropped.

"Are you really a Jonin?" Sasuke asked dryly.

Naruto continued to stare at him without comment.

"Tough crowd," Kakashi muttered. "Well let's begin with introductions. Tell me your names, your dreams, your likes, and dislikes."

"Isn't it considered rude to ask someone for their name without giving yours first?" Sasuke asked.

The Jonin shrugged. "Fair enough. My name is Hatake Kakashi, there are lots of things I like and dislike, and my dreams are none of your business."

"Wait! All you really told us was your name!" Sakura objected.

"Yes," he said with a hidden smile. Now let me hear from all of you. Why don't we start with the one dressed like a street cone."

"You have something against orange?" Naruto asked in a friendly voice.

"Not at all! I sometimes paint my bullseyes that color to make them easier to see." Sasuke snorted and Sakura laughed out loud. Naruto kept smiling but his eyes were not in tune with his mouth. *You're not nearly as good at hiding your feelings as you think Naruto.*

Ignoring the reaction of his new teammates Naruto spoke up in a light carefree voice. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto. I like ramen, training, and the old man. I *hate* anyone who hates me." At this point he sent a deliberate look Sakura's way. The girl did not miss it and shrank away from him a little.

Kakashi did not miss the look or the reaction.

"As for dreams I have two, I want to make the Hokage proud of me. And I want to be Hokage myself one day."

"Why?" Kakashi asked judiciously.

Naruto broadened his smile. "So that I can punish all ninja who are more than ten minutes late to a meeting."

That got light laughs from both Sasuke and Sakura.

Kakashi decided to let it go, but there was something about Naruto that was... troubling. "Now the little lady."

"Uhm, my name is Haruno Sakura. My dream is..." she looked at Sasuke and began to giggle. "What I like is..." she again looked in Sasuke's direction only to burst into a fit of giggles. "What I hate is..." She looked at Naruto and saw he looking right back. "Is... I... don't really hate anything or anyone I guess."

Seeing the interaction he frowned. *Marvelous, she's a fan girl of one boy and skittish about the other.* "And finally..."

Sasuke grunted and answered. "My name is Uchiha Sasuke. There are lots of things I dislike and I don't really like anything. I can't really call it a dream but I do have an ambition. I want to resurrect my clan and... kill a certain man."

Naruto looked at the boy and tried not to sneer. *Big talk, I know what it's like to kill.*

About what I expected, Kakashi thought a bit sadly. "Well that was certainly enlightening. All right, we'll begin tomorrow at 6 a.m. sharp."

"What will our first mission be sensei?" Sakura asked.

"Actually it won't be a mission, it will be a test of your survival skills. This test will pit you against me and it will determine if any of you are fit to be Genin."

"A test? Sensei I don't understand," Sakura said. "We just had our test to be ninja a couple days ago."

Chuckling Kakashi shook his head. "Oh that? The academy graduation test is only meant to weed out the hopeless. Only a complete no talent could possibly fail it."

Naruto silently clenched his fists and tightened his gaze. He was already starting to dislike this teacher.

"The test I'm about to give you is the one that determines if you will become ninja or not."

"What happens to the ones who fail?" Sasuke asked.

"They'll be sent back to the academy for additional training," Kakashi noted gleefully. "If you want to become real ninja you'll have to prove yourselves tomorrow against me. Come to training ground one by six sharp with all your weapons and gear. Oh, and don't eat breakfast."

"Why not?" Sakura asked.

"I wouldn't want you vomiting all over the place, I will see you tomorrow." He disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

"Hey Sasuke-kun want to get some dinner and go over strategies with me?"

"No," he said and shuffled away. *I'm passing tomorrow no matter what. I can't let these two drag me down.*

Disappointed she decided to talk to her other teammate. "Say Naruto, you know I don't really hate..."

Naruto was already gone.

That night twenty shadow clones swarmed all over training ground one while the original Naruto studied forbidden jutsu in his dreams.

The Kyuubi kept careful watch and grinned. He knew it was too soon to get the brat to tear off his seal; he would need to carefully manipulate him until the time was right. But being an immortal biju he knew how to be patient.

The bell test

The alarm clock went off at a quarter past 5. As Naruto woke up he groggily made his way to the bathroom. All the bunshins he'd sent out last night had dispelled once they were done with their work. With all their memories he now had a good idea of the Training Ground one's terrain and all the best spots for possible ambushes. He also knew where all the things his clones had set up were.

After a hot shower and getting dressed in his beloved orange jumpsuit he packed on his supplies including a whole bunch of brand new equipment. He then performed a jutsu. **"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."** Thirty clones came to life packing the tiny apartment. They fled out the door and window and raced to Training Ground One.

Naruto grinned. He had no idea what the test involved, only that it had something to do with survival training and would pit him and his new team against their sensei. Whatever happened he intended to pass today, there was no way he was going back to the academy. He went out into the still dark morning filled with excitement.

At the very center of the training ground were three old wooden posts. Naruto headed straight for them. Not wanting to be late he'd gotten here a full fifteen minutes early. He had also skipped breakfast as he'd been told to. He was surprised to see he wasn't the first one to arrive.

Sitting cross legged in front of the middle post Sasuke eyed him as he entered the clearing.

"Sasuke," He said with a polite nod.

"Naruto," Sasuke answered.

That was it for the conversation between them. Naruto leaned against the post to Sasuke's right and waited.

A few minutes later Sakura arrived. She eagerly sat down next to Sasuke and began talking to him.

"Are you excited about the test Sasuke-kun?"

"No."

"Uh, yeah, me neither! Do you think it will be really hard?"

"Probably."

"Yeah, I think so too, but as long as you're here I'm sure we'll pass. Even if we have to put up with Naruto to do it."

"Shut your mouth Sakura."

Both Sakura and Sasuke looked over at him in surprise.

"Wha... what did you say?!" Sakura got up to her feet and began shaking a fist at him. She had clobbered him for a lot less than that.

He looked at her with cold blue eyes and spoke with a harsh voice she had never imagined him to have. "I'm standing right here, there's no reason for you to insult me. I know I'm not your precious little Sasuke-kun, but that doesn't mean I'll be your whipping boy anymore. We're all ninja now and on the same team, start treating me with a little respect. Especially since I'm going to be Hokage one day."

"Like an idiot like you could ever be Hokage!" She shouted. The way he'd treated her yesterday had caught her totally off guard. But having had some time to think about it she had decided to remind him of his place. She would *not* be talked down to by a fool like him. Especially not in front of Sasuke. "You've been saying that for years now and I'm sick of it! You should be grateful just to be on a team with me and Sasuke! Do you even know how lucky you are?!"

He laughed. "Oh I know I'm lucky, I have lots of luck, all of it bad."

"Naruto," she growled and took a step towards him obviously intent on delivering another of her beatings. But to her surprise he did not cower or run as he always did. He stepped towards her and took a fighting stance.

"Don't start something unless you're ready to finish it... Haruno."

She froze. This person standing in front of her *couldn't* be the same boy she'd shared a class with for the last four years, impossible. The way he was looking at her made her feel... afraid.

"Knock it off both of you," Sasuke was still seated. "Do you really want to start a fight right before our test?" He looked at Sakura. "The dobe has a point, he *is* our teammate now, and you are going to have to treat him a little differently." He then turned to Naruto. "As for you, if you want respect dead last, earn it!"

"I'm sorry Sasuke-kun!" She immediately bowed in apology, to Sasuke not to Naruto, and sat back down.

Naruto stared down at the serene Uchiha. "I'm not the dead last anymore."

"We'll see."

Yeah we will you arrogant jerk. He went back to his post and decided to sit down. The three of them waited in silence as the night sky was starting to lighten.

Better than three hours later the sun was now well above the horizon and they were still waiting.

"I wonder if he ran into another black cat," Naruto muttered.

That actually drew a small chuckle from Sasuke.

Naruto checked his watch again, it was 9:12. His stomach let out a small growl. "Okay, enough of this crap!" He reached into a pouch and pulled out something in a plain brown wrapper. Tearing it open he had what looked like a granola bar.

"Hey! What's that?" Sakura asked.

"It's a rations bar," Naruto explained. "This is what real ninja carry out in the field. One bar gives you all the energy and nutrition you need for a whole day."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "I know it's a rations bar idiot. What are you doing with it?"

"What do you think I'm going to do with it genius?" He bit into it and started to slowly chew it. It took him awhile and he needed some water to finally get it down. "Ugh, it's like eating wood paste!"

"Sensei told us not to eat anything!"

"Wrong, he said not to have breakfast," Naruto pointed out. "I didn't know how long this test would take so I brought food with me in case it was an all day thing. And anyway after keeping us waiting twice I'm not worried about what he said." Naruto took another big bite. It tasted lousy but at least it filled your stomach.

As she watched him cram the rest of the bar in his mouth Sakura was reminded of how hungry she was.

"Ah, I don't suppose you have any more do you?"

He looked at her knowingly. "I might, why?"

He wants to hear me beg. Cha! Like that's going to happen! "No... no reason."

Naruto shrugged and drank some water from his canteen to get rid of the taste.

Just before ten Kakashi came strolling along with a large alarm clock and two bentos in his arms.

"You're late!" Sakura howled and jumped up. Naruto and Sasuke came to their feet as well.

"Sorry, I got lost on the road of life." He nonchalantly placed the alarm clock and bentos atop the middle post and pressed down the timer. "There, it's set for noon." From one of the pouches on his vest he took out two shiny objects on strings. "Your task is to take these two bells from me before time expires. Anyone who fails to get a bell will be tied up and not allowed to eat a lunch. But more importantly they will automatically fail and be sent back for remedial training at the academy."

"But sensei," Sakura spoke up. "There are only two bells."

Kakashi nodded his head merrily. "Good observation Sakura. That of course means that at most only two of you can pass this test."

The three students all looked at one another. They had all come here assuming the test was meant for them to pass or fail as a team. Now it looked like it was every man for himself. Naruto and Sasuke were both determined to get a bell no matter what. Sakura was determined to get one with Sasuke so that their love would have a chance to survive. All three of them looked at each other with open mistrust.

And here we go again, Kakashi thought sadly. "You are free to use any weapons or techniques you know. Come at me with the intent to kill or you won't stand a chance."

"If we kill you do we get in trouble?" Naruto asked and sounded completely serious.

Kakashi lifted an eyebrow. He knew the boy had taken out Mizuki. *He seems pretty eager to kill another sensei.* "If you can kill me not only will you not get in trouble but you'll be guaranteed promotion."

Kakashi did not like the way Naruto grinned at hearing that. *Somehow I don't think he'll have any trouble coming at me with the intent to kill.* He didn't think Sasuke would have that problem either given his serious and brooding gaze. Sakura though was already looking nervous.

"Well then, ready, steady... go!"

Four figures leapt away and out of sight.

Naruto had noticed a weakness in the kage bunshin jutsu. At the time the clones were created they knew everything the original knew. Plans and detailed orders could be given without a word being spoken. When the clone vanished the original gained all his knowledge and experience. But in the time between there was no connection between him and his clones, if he wanted them to know what he knew now he would have to physically tell them. If he could have somehow maintained a mental connection to his clones while they existed he could have passed on everything Kakashi had said and also fine tuned his plans. As it was he'd sent them out with just a general notion of what would happen. Also he couldn't sense his own clones, he had to hope they had gotten where he needed them.

This jutsu would kick even more butt if I could maintain a connection with all of them. When I start inventing my own jutsus I'll work on that!

But that was for the future, right now he needed to get one of those bells to pass this test. He closed his eyes and took a deep whiff of the air. It was hard to distinguish, but he could smell his own scent from the nearby trees. He thought perhaps fifteen to twenty of his clones were nearby.

As Naruto watched Kakashi leapt down from his hiding spot and casually began to stroll along a clearing, obviously inviting attack.

Naruto held back. Despite what Sakura and a lot of people thought he *wasn't* an idiot. His poor grades had been the result of indifferent teachers and his own lack of interest. Now that he had decided to get serious about things he was using his brain and not just acting on impulse.

Kakashi was a Jonin. In Konoha only about one ninja in every fifty achieved that rank. To have made it to such an elite status he had to have skills despite his lackadaisical attitude thus far. *'Know your enemy and know yourself and in a thousand battles you shall never be in danger.'* That was a quote from an ancient general that was also the fiftieth rule of ninja conduct. Before he attacked he wanted to see what his enemy could do. And if he knew Sasuke...

Out of some nearby branches several kunai and shuriken flew. They caught Kakashi unprepared and riddled his chest and arms. Then there was a puff of smoke and a log appeared in his place.

Naruto nodded, as he'd expected Sasuke had gone ahead and attacked. The arrogant bastard probably thought he could beat Kakashi single handed just because he was an Uchiha. As he watched Kakashi leapt back down into the open again, this time he simply stood there. He even took out a book and seemed to be reading.

Sasuke leapt down from his own hiding spot and approached him.

"What are you doing?" Sasuke demanded.

Kakashi glanced up from his reading material. "Oh I just want to see how this chapter ends. You can go ahead and attack me, it shouldn't make any difference."

With a furious shout Sasuke went at him. He delivered a series of kicks and punches that actually forced Kakashi to momentarily toss aside his book and concentrate on the fight. As he blocked a leaping kick from Sasuke the boy was in position to reach for the bells that

were now tied to his belt and just missed them. Kakashi leapt back and nodded at him with surprise.

"Not bad Sasuke, you definitely do the Uchiha clan proud, but still not quite good enough."

"Sasuke!" A girl shouted. Sakura ran over to his side, a kunai in her hand. Though her knees were shaking slightly she faced Kakashi with a determined look. "Sasuke-kun! Let's get the bells together so we can stay a team!"

"Oh, and what about your other teammate?" Kakashi inquired innocently.

"What about him?" Sakura asked. "Sasuke-kun is the only one who matters. If one of us has to fail it should be Naruto, I don't care what happens to him any way."

Beneath his mask Kakashi frowned.

Naruto was close enough to hear every word. Her attitude didn't surprise him or hurt him. It just confirmed what he'd finally realized; that trying to befriend people was a waste of time.

Sasuke looked over at her and at the way she was shaking and how she was holding her kunai. With a grim expression he stepped up beside her. "I'm sorry Sakura." With a clean motion he delivered a hard chop right to the back of her head.

Sakura gasped and dropped right in front of him.

From his hiding spot Naruto widened his eyes. *Whoa, he's even more of a bastard than I thought.*

If Naruto's reaction was surprise Kakashi's was as well with a large measure of disgust and fury as well. "What did you just do?! Why did you attack your teammate?"

"She's not ready to be a ninja yet," he said stoically. "It'll be safer for her to go back to the academy. If she were to fight beside me she'd only get in my way, she wouldn't even make a decent diversion."

"Oh I see," Kakashi spoke. For some reason there was a bitter resentment in his voice. "Some teammates are worth helping and some are not?"

"I'm an avenger," Sasuke spoke solemnly. "I have to acquire power as fast as I can, I can't let anyone get in the way of that."

Kakashi looked at him with his single eye. "I take back what I said a moment ago about you making your clan proud. You're trash Sasuke; no you're lower than trash."

The proud Uchiha stood there for a second in shock. Then furiously started to perform hand signs.

He never got a chance to finish his jutsu.

Kakashi covered the space separating them in the blink of an eye and delivered a kick into Sasuke's gut that sent him flying with a cry of pain. While still in the air Kakashi drove his fist right into the boy's face, smashing him into the ground and leaving him bloodied and unconscious.

With the fight now over in spectacular fashion The Jonin sensei did a quick check on Sasuke's pulse and Sakura's. Apparently satisfied he walked away from where they were before again taking out his book.

"So I guess it's my turn now?"

Kakashi looked up to see he was surrounded by about two hundred clones.

Sighing the sensei carefully put away his book. "Yes it is, show me what you can do Naruto."

The worst

"Yes it is, show me what you can do Naruto."

At those words every one of the clones grinned. In the next second a hail of kunai and shuriken came at him from all directions.

I see he really is taking the whole 'intent to kill' thing seriously. Kakashi was punctured by a hundred different weapons. His form vanished in a puff of smoke to be replaced by another log. The clones halted their attacks and began looking around.

From a nearby tree Kakashi noted the lack of panic on the part of the clones. Obviously he hadn't expected that opening attack to actually take him out. Kakashi had read the personnel files on all three of his students. Nothing in Naruto's had even hinted he was capable of this level of organization and self control. He knew of course from the Hokage that Naruto had gained the kage bunshin and used it to kill the traitor Mizuki. But that didn't explain the sternness of attitude that was on display. According to his file Naruto was hot tempered, emotional, reckless, and over confident. None of those personality traits were on display at the moment.

Did the incident with Mizuki change him that much? Kakashi wondered. *Or was he always hiding his real self?*

"He's up there!" One of the clones suddenly shouted.

More kunai and shuriken forced him to leap out of his hiding place. "I'm not Mizuki you know," he said pleasantly. He took out six or seven clones as he landed.

"I know," the original called out. He was standing in the same spot watching as his clones surged after Kakashi. "That's why I'll only kill you if I have to."

The clones came at him, all of them with kunai in their hands.

Despite their numbers they weren't much of a threat. With superior strength, speed, and fighting ability he had no trouble taking out the clones as they got near. Dozen exploded into smoke as more came forward to take their place. Kakashi kept leaping back to make sure none of them got behind him.

"I'm afraid frontal attacks won't..."

Snap!

He felt a wire break beneath his foot. He sensed more than felt the danger and leapt up just in time to avoid a tree branch swinging down. Had he been in that spot he would have been mashed against the tree trunk and probably knocked out, at the very least he'd have been hurt and slowed.

"You set up a trap? That's... aack!"

The ground he landed on gave way and he fell into a pit.

"Actually I set up about fifty traps," the original said smugly. "Doing pranks teaches you how to prepare."

Before his clones could reach the pit though Kakashi leapt out and onto a nearby tree branch.

Damn it, Naruto thought. I should have filled the pit with sharpened stakes. But I didn't think it would be okay to kill him. Oh well, it can't be helped. He watched as Kakashi was again forced to jump to avoid being turned into a pin cushion. The fact he'd lost so many clones didn't matter at all. For all the Jonin's superior skill he was being pushed in the direction Naruto wanted.

Kakashi again landed facing the oncoming clones. He didn't set off any traps this time. But instead three clones jumped him from behind. These were not among the two hundred he had started with which Kakashi had kept careful track of. No, these were among the thirty he had created early this morning specifically for this reason.

They held his arms momentarily in place, if he could not form hand signs he could not work a substitution and escape. Another of his clones leapt and delivered a punch to the immobilized Kakashi's face.

Only to have him vanish in a puff of smoke.

The original Naruto gasped. "No way! How did you..."

Without warning Kakashi popped out of the ground behind him. Naruto had no chance to react before receiving a hard punch to the back of his head. He was turned off like a light and dropped to the ground. Throughout the training ground there were pops as all his clones were dispelled.

Checking his pulse Kakashi confirmed the boy was only unconscious. He tossed him over one shoulder and headed back to where Sasuke and Sakura were peacefully resting.

A loud ringing woke him up. There was an ache in the back of his skull. As he slowly came fully awake he realized his arms were bound tight and he was tied to one of the poles. Looking over he saw that Sasuke and Sakura were in a similar state.

"You know I don't usually eat so much for lunch, but I did have a decent work out." Kakashi adjusted his mask as he stood up; two empty bentos were at his feet. He glanced at Naruto. "I actually worked up quite an appetite thanks to you; I have to admit you did pretty well." Going over to the central post where Sasuke was tied he shut off the alarm. "Of course you still failed in the end."

Naruto glared at him. "How did you get away at the end? I know you didn't work a jutsu I had your arms held!"

"The me you caught was a kage bunshin I created when I was in that pit and momentarily out of your line of sight. I actually worked an

earth style jutsu to get underneath you. The main mistake you made was just standing there like you did while you let your clones do the work. It pointed the real you out to me. If you hadn't done that I wouldn't have known which you to take out."

Kakashi came over to him and leaned in close. "You're not as clever as you think Naruto," Kakashi said in a low whisper just for him.

Naruto looked back at him and got the definite feeling the Jonin knew a lot more than he was letting on.

Sasuke was curious about what he was hearing. He'd been unconscious and completely missed Naruto's fight. He'd assumed the dobe would have lasted all of about ten seconds, but from what Kakashi was saying it actually sounded like he had given a good performance.

That wasn't important now. "I want another chance," Sasuke said in a low growl. "That wasn't a fair test of my skills."

Kakashi looked at him with a happy smile hidden away. "There's nothing fair about a ninja's life or career, get used to it. As for another chance you'll all get one... in six months once you complete remedial training."

He stepped back and gave them a dramatic, 'thumb's down.' "You all FAIL! Not only do you fail but I have to tell you that of the six teams I've been asked to test you were by FAR the worst of the lot."

"Don't put me in the same category as Sakura and the dobe!" Sasuke said angrily. "I'm not like them."

"Well that's true," Kakashi admitted. "They aren't lower than trash."

Sasuke looked furious enough to bite through his ropes. "Don't call me that! I'm an Uchiha! How dare you say that to me!"

"Being an Uchiha doesn't make you deserving of respect Sasuke," Kakashi said sadly. "Though a lot of the people of this village seem to have forgotten that. Whether you should be respected or not is based solely on what you *do* and not on who you are."

Sasuke looked sullen but kept quiet.

"Tell me, do any of you even know what the purpose to this test was?"

"Duh, to try and get the bells of course!" Naruto snapped.

"Wrong! The real goal wasn't to get the bells."

All three of them looked at him blankly.

"Then... then what was it sensei?" Sakura asked in a timid voice. What had happened had completely shattered her self confidence.

"Teamwork," Kakashi snapped. "The entire point of this was to see if you could come together and work as a team."

"What do you mean work as a team?" Naruto yelled. Being beaten and tied up like a pig at market was seriously irritating him. "There were only two bells and you said from the start that only two of us could pass!"

Kakashi merely nodded. "That's right; the test was deliberately set up to turn you against one another. The object was to see if any of you could overcome your own self interests and put the need of your team first. But instead..."

He turned to Sakura. "You decided that Sasuke was the only one worth fighting for. From your own mouth you said you didn't care about what happened to Naruto. Just because you don't personally like someone doesn't mean you turn your back on them! In your ninja career you will be assigned to all sorts of missions with different teams made up of different personalities. Are you expecting to like

every single person you work with? You need to watch out for *all* those you work with, not just the ones you happen to like. You don't get to just pick and choose who's worthy of your help."

Ashamed by this critical, and accurate, description of her she put her head down in shame.

He next turned to Naruto. "Your skills are pretty advanced and as an individual ninja you did better than any other candidate I've tested before."

Sasuke looked up not believing what he was hearing. *The dobe did that well?*

" **But...** I noticed that all your elaborate plans didn't include your teammates. Obviously you must have set up those traps before I explained the test to you. At a time when you would have assumed it was a team test with all of you passing or failing together. Did you at least try and form a plan with the others?"

"No," he answered brusquely.

"And why not?"

"Because if I'd tried to I would have just been ignored," he said bitterly. "The teme wouldn't have wanted to listen to any plan I came up with and Sakura would have just gone along with her Sasuke-kun."

Hearing the extreme bitterness in his voice Sakura looked over at him. *Have I really been that unfair?* She had never ever thought about it from his side. Never stopped to think how her shouts and punches might have affected him. He was an obstacle between her and Sasuke and that was all. But after what Sasuke had done all her assumptions were now open to question.

"From what I've seen that's probably true," Kakashi said.

Sakura flinched at his judgment while Sasuke had no reaction.

"But you might have tried and put the team ahead of yourself. You also could have joined in with Sasuke and Sakura. Instead you deliberately chose to stand back and watch."

"I wanted to see how strong you were before I made my move," Naruto said defensively.

"Scouting the enemy isn't a bad tactic," Kakashi said. "But I can't agree with deliberately sacrificing your teammates to gain a personal advantage."

He turned to look at Sasuke. "And finally there is you, the avenger." Kakashi looked hard at him. "You attacked your own teammate Sasuke, for no other reason than you thought she would get in your way. Let me tell you something Uchiha Sasuke. In the world of the ninja those who violate the rules and laws are called trash. However... those who don't take care of their comrades are worse than trash. And that is what you are."

Kakashi turned around and slowly walked away. "We're done now. All of you report back to the academy tomorrow morning at ten. You'll be permitted to take the test again once you complete six months remedial training."

"Sensei," Sakura called out. "Aren't you going to untie us?"

"No, any ninja should be an escape artist you're on your own." And with that he leapt away and was gone.

The ropes were so tight that they barely permitted any movement at all. Because he was stronger than he should have been Naruto had more luck moving his arms than the others. After ten minutes he finally got a hand on one of his kunai. After ten more minutes he cut through one of the ropes and was able to free himself.

Sasuke looked at him and didn't say a word.

Naruto was not surprised. He knew Sasuke would rather die of thirst than ask anyone for help, especially not from the idiot dead last.

Sakura looked over at him sadly. "I... I don't suppose you'd cut me loose would you?"

Naruto then did something that truly surprised her. He smiled and nodded. "Sure Sakura-chan, no problem." He came over and began slicing into her ropes. After only a minute she was able to wriggle free.

Rubbing her arms she looked at him and lowered her eyes feeling ashamed. "Tha... thank you Naruto-kun. I... I thought you hated me."

"I did," he said making her flinch a bit. "But... but if we can I'd like to start over." He held out his hand to her. "I know we're not teammates anymore, but who knows? Maybe we will be again. Let's be friends Sakura-chan, and if we ever become teammates again let's watch out for each other."

Smiling with relief she gladly took his hand. "Naruto I'd like that! And I'm so sorry for the way I've treated you. Please forgive me; you didn't deserve any of it."

"It's already forgiven Sakura-chan." His warm smile set her mind at ease. *This* was the Naruto she remembered.

His kunai still in hand he turned to Sasuke. "Come on help me cut him down."

"I didn't ask for help!" Sasuke said loudly.

Naruto sighed and began cutting the rope. "I know, but even if the team's been dissolved think of this as one comrade taking care of another okay? You don't have to ask and I don't expect any thanks."

"That's right," Sakura agreed and cut with her own kunai. "Even if it's too late let's act like teammates should now." She looked up at him. "I forgive you for hitting me Sasuke." She quickly lowered her eyes again to concentrate on freeing him.

He was soon released and out of the ropes. Sasuke rubbed his arms a bit and looked at Naruto and Sakura. "Thanks," he said quickly and quietly.

"Well this is a surprise," Kakashi leaped out of the woods. "I honestly didn't think the three of you would listen to what I said."

Sakura looked at him in surprise. "Sensei what are you doing here? I thought you had long gone."

"Actually, I've been observing you this whole time. I decided to give you one last chance to pass my test."

"What do you mean?" Sakura asked.

"I mean I wanted to see if you would show you cared for your teammates when you thought there was nothing to gain by it. I am very pleased to see that *maybe* you get it. This doesn't make up for your behavior while trying to get the bells, but it's enough to make me at least reconsider."

"Does that mean we pass?" Sasuke asked.

"What it means is that I'll take you on as a team for a *probationary* period," he told them. "Instead of spending the next six months at the academy I'll let you act as an active squad. However, if I see any signs you are forgetting what you've learned here today I'll disband team seven and send all of you back to the academy. Is that clear?"

They all nodded their heads.

"Very well then, under those conditions team seven passes. We'll meet tomorrow at the small foot bridge near the academy at ten to

begin our first mission."

As the three new Genin all shouted in triumph Kakashi carefully eyes Naruto. His actions had surprised him, and it was mainly due to his words to Sakura and Sasuke that he had decided to give them a chance. But he couldn't help but feel there was something... off about the boy and the way he'd behaved.

"Hey sensei," Naruto said. "Shouldn't you treat your new team to a meal to help us celebrate and bond?"

The other two looked at him speculatively.

Sighing he nodded. "Fine, you're probably all really hungry." They cheered and followed him out.

As Naruto walked with them he rubbed his nose. He was still getting used to his enhanced sense of smell, but there was no denying it was useful.

As when he'd picked up Kakashi's scent as he struggled to free himself. He'd guessed that if Kakashi was nearby watching there might still be a chance to pass. So he'd *forgiven* Sakura and played the part of the good teammate.

He looked at Kakashi's back and hid a nasty little smile.

Team probation

Naruto held Tora out at arm's length. Though his many scratches would soon disappear he still wanted to throttle the mangy thing.

"Nice job team," Kakashi said with his usual over exuberant tone. "We captured our target in record time. Hopefully this will be the last time he escapes."

The three members of team seven all shared a knowing look behind their sensei's back, this was already the *third* time they'd had to track down this annoying cat. It had been a little over a month since the bell test. In that time they had been busy performing various mind numbing and utterly pointless tasks. Their normal routine was to meet at the bridge, wait a couple hours for their sensei to show, mosey over to the Tower to be assigned a D-rank mission, and then complete it. Depending on the nature of the mission and how long it took to complete they would either return to the Tower for a second mission or be dismissed for the day.

Naruto was *not* happy with this. Kakashi had explained that that these low level missions were vital for them to acquire the necessary experience to tackle more difficult tasks. But he honestly couldn't see how catching runaway pets, walking dogs, or cleaning up vacant lots were supposed to help them prepare for anything.

He'd assumed once he's passed the test Kakashi would begin showing them all sorts of lethal techniques and amazing jutsus. Hah! All their sensei ever seemed to do was stand off to the side reading his little orange book while they worked. He had yet to teach them *anything* of value. Naruto hadn't wanted to complain to the Hokage, he was still trying to shed the appearance of a whiny kid. He had however gone and just talked to the old man while subtly mentioning he'd like to have someone teach him improve his taijutsu.

The Hokage had grinned slightly at that, obviously getting his message. The old man had then replied just as circumspectly, telling him how fortunate he was to have a great ninja like Kakashi as a sensei, and how he should trust in his judgment.

So the D-ranks continued unabated.

Since they'd bagged Tora so quickly they were headed back to the Tower for a second mission.

When they arrived the Fire daimyo's wife was there to retrieve her pet and pay the mission fee. Seeing the way she half smothered the cat almost made Naruto feel sorry for it. Almost.

"Another successful mission completed in under two hours," the Hokage said with a satisfied grin. "Your team seems to be doing quite well Kakashi."

"Oh it's nothing really," Kakashi said pleasantly.

His students all grunted and threw imaginary daggers into his back.

"Since you've gotten done so early I'll let you choose your next assignment," The Hokage said. "You can babysit, paint a fence, or dig up some vegetables."

Naruto wanted to scream, 'none of the above' at the top of his lungs. He wanted a real mission that actually involved using some ninja skills. But throwing a tantrum in front of the old man wouldn't help with changing his image.

Kakashi turned back to them with a hidden grin. "Well team what do you think?"

"Whatever I don't care," Sasuke grumbled.

Naruto put on a big grin and turned to his other teammate. "What do you want to do Sakura-chan?"

The girl looked at him gratefully. Since the bell test their relationship had drastically improved. He no longer asked her out or peppered her with compliments, but he was friendly enough. She was still devoted to getting Sasuke, but was much more reserved around him now. A lot of her confidence seemed to have left her after what he did. She was actually willing to talk to him and treat him as an equal. She wound up talked to him a lot more than she did to Sasuke.

"Why don't we paint the fence? That will probably be the easiest job."

Naruto nodded enthusiastically. "That's my vote then."

"Fine, whatever," Sasuke muttered.

"Looks like we have a winner," Kakashi said.

The Hokage assigned them the mission and they were out the door.

Sarutobi watched their departure with a certain satisfaction. When they'd had their test he had used his crystal ball to observe them. Though it had gone horribly wrong at first he was extremely proud of the way Naruto had acted towards Sakura and Sasuke. Despite all his hardships the boy had somehow kept a good heart and was beginning to mature into a fine man and ninja. His ability with both shadow clones and with traps had also been impressive, a sign of real limitless potential.

Sasuke's talk of being an avenger and caring only for power was troubling, but he had faith that Kakashi would help him find the right path. He also had a secret hope that he and Naruto would be able to form a strong bond and help each other.

"What is the next order of business?" Sarutobi asked.

One of his assistants scanned the papers in front of him. "We still have that C-rank to Wave country that needs to be assigned."

Sarutobi nodded. "Oh yes, the escort mission. Hmmm," he looked at a list of available squads. It was just a low level C-rank so any competent team would do. "Assign Renji and his Genin squad."

The assistant made a note on one of his papers. "Yes Hokage-sama."

The job was done in fifteen minutes time. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura had painted an old faded wood fence a bright shade of yellow. They'd been helped by twenty of Naruto's shadow clones. Naruto had offered to do the whole job himself but Kakashi insisted that they all had to work. (While he sat in a chair reading.)

When they were done the home owner came out and nodded his approval. He paid Kakashi the mission fee.

"Well, there's still plenty of daylight left," Kakashi said teasing them. "Shall we go for a third?"

All three students groaned.

Chuckling Kakashi spoke. "All right, that'll be it for one day. I'll go report in to the Tower; you're dismissed for the day. We'll meet again tomorrow at ten." They all knew that meant Kakashi would be there right around noon. "Here," he handed each of them three hundred ryu. That was ten percent of the mission fee, the standard commission for members of a squad. As squad leader Kakashi was entitled to twenty percent, while the village would receive the remaining fifty. It wasn't much but it wasn't bad for fifteen minutes work.

Kakashi vanished in a swirl of wind and leaves.

With their sensei gone Sasuke wordlessly turned to go.

"Uh... Sasuke? Would you, maybe way to..." Sakura asked fearfully.

"No," Sasuke answered flatly and kept right on going.

Sakura lowered her head in defeat. She used to believe with total conviction that they would end up together. Now she wasn't so sure. When he knocked her out during their test that was proof that he didn't respect her. She knew she needed to get his respect but didn't know how.

Naruto gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder. *Serves you right you dumb fan girl.* "Don't worry about it Sakura-chan, he'll come around eventually."

She looked up at him with a grateful smile. "Do you really think so Naruto-kun?"

"Sure," he said and turned to go. "See you tomorrow."

"Hey Naruto! Wait!"

"Huh? What is it Sakura?"

"You want to get something to eat? I'm really hungry and I don't feel like going home just yet." Unlike with Sasuke she felt no nervousness about asking Naruto. Since he had stopped trying to date her she felt completely comfortable being alone with him.

"Can we get ramen?"

"Sure, why not."

They were sitting together at Ichiraku's each enjoying a bowl of ramen and some pleasant conversation.

"So how long do you think it'll be before we actually do a real mission?" Sakura asked.

"About another five months," Naruto said morosely. "He'll probably have us do these dumb D-ranks the whole time we're on probation."

Sakura grimaced. "Do you really think so?"

"Well, I don't know for sure or anything, I hope not. But the way my life usually goes it wouldn't surprise me."

"I don't think we'll be doing this that long," Sakura said cheerfully. "I talked to Ino and she says her sensei promised them they'd move on to better missions within a few more weeks."

"Their sensei is the old man's son right?" Naruto asked.

"Yes, Sarutobi Asuma." Sakura agreed.

"Well *their* sensei might, as for ours..."

Naruto took one hand and covered his left eye. With his other he mimed holding a book open. "We'll go on a more challenging mission when I think you're ready. Oh, and you missed some dog poop over there."

Sakura burst out into laughter. "Ha! That's perfect!"

"Well I've heard him say it often enough." Naruto got back to his ramen. "You know I wouldn't mind these dumb missions half so much if he would actually *train* us. I mean isn't a sensei supposed to instruct his students on what they need to know?"

Sakura nodded her agreement. "I know, the way things are we'll end up going on our first mission not knowing anything more than we did when we graduated the academy."

For Naruto that wasn't true. He'd spent the last month sparring with his clones while awake and studying the, 'Kibaku Bunshin no Jutsu' while asleep. He hoped to have it down soon. He was improving all the time even without his sensei's help. But with it he would have improved even faster.

He resented Kakashi and his lackadaisical attitude. From their fight he knew the Jonin was very capable and was willing to bet he knew a lot of things that would be really useful. It was frustrating as hell knowing Kakashi could be helping him grow strong but was choosing not to out of simple indifference. He needed to become powerful and having Kakashi as his sensei was getting in his way.

"Hey! Look who it is! Team probation!" A loud abrasive voice called from the street.

He and Sakura both turned to see Kiba grinning at them with his little white dog sitting on his head. Standing next to him were Shino and that quiet weirdo Hinata. It annoyed him that the other teams knew they had been placed on probation, rumors in Konoha always spread fast.

"Don't you two look sweet!" Kiba barked. "You on a date?"

"Don't be a baka!" Sakura yelled at him. "I want to be with Sasuke-kun, there's nothing wrong with having something to eat with a friend and teammate."

"I don't know," Kiba teased. "You look pretty chummy."

Normally Naruto would have jumped in but his attention was momentarily distracted. He was looking at the girl in the bulky tan jacket. There was a pungent scent coming off of her in strength. *Why is she feeling jealous?*

As soon as she noticed he was looking at her Hinata's face became a deep crimson. "Kiba-kun, let's go please." She hurriedly grabbed him by the arm and pulled him down the street. He protested but let himself be dragged away.

"How did they end up passing the test?" Sakura muttered angrily. She looked over and saw her teammate still staring in the direction Kiba and the others had gone in. "Hey Naruto, don't let what that idiot said bother you."

"What? Oh, right Sakura-chan." He smiled and turned back towards her.

What had distracted him hadn't had anything to do with Kiba. When Hinata had noticed him looking at her a different scent had come out. It was the same scent he got from Sakura whenever she would begin to stare at Sasuke. It was a scent that meant physical attraction.

No way, it couldn't be. Is Hinata attracted to me?

It seemed wholly impossible. No girl liked him, that was a fact. There was no way Hinata could like him the way Sakura liked Sasuke.

And yet... that was what his nose was telling him.

Quickly shaking his head he put it out of his mind for now.

A week later they were reporting to the Tower just after twelve noon for an assignment.

The Hokage eyed the squad with interest. "Well Kakashi, do you think your team is ready to handle a mission outside the village?"

Instantly all three students perked up.

Kakashi sighed heavily. "They'll probably all either get lost or killed but I suppose there's no avoiding it." He nodded his head. "Yes Hokage-sama. I feel team seven is competent, if just barely, to handle such a mission."

"Very well, we've received a request to provide security for a small festival in the village of Hikedo in northern Fire country. It should only take a week's time and be simple enough to complete. It's a C-rank mission."

"All right!" Naruto shouted. "It's about time!"

"Quiet dobe," Sasuke said. But even he looked a little excited.

Kakashi grinned and took the assignment from the Hokage. "All right team, we'll be leaving tomorrow morning at eight a.m. sharp and be gone for about seven days. Go home and make whatever preparations you need to. Meet me at the gate tomorrow with all your weapons and equipment, and don't be late."

Team seven was about to get their first real taste of ninja life.

A promise

That night Kakashi headed out to one of the bars. It was sort of an informal tradition for him. Entering the smoke filled bar he couldn't help but chuckle silently at the 'mission' he was leading. He'd come of age in the midst of the Third Great Ninja War. When the village had been fighting on multiple fronts and was short of people. He'd been assigned to his team and his beloved sensei. Back then there was no time to take it easy with D-ranks and training at the academy had been strictly geared towards readying you for life and death combat.

Minato had broken them in with short range patrols, and before long taken them out on real missions. He was a veteran with over fifty enemy kills by the time the war ended. Then he'd gone into the ANBU and become a black ops legend. His last mission before taking on his team had involved blowing up a drug lab in Nagamo and exterminating the gang involved. In Fire country if the local police faced a difficult problem putting in a quiet call to the Hokage was always an option.

Navigating the crowded bar he spotted a friendly face and was waved over to a little table.

"Kakashi, you hear the latest?" Asuma asked as he sat down.

The second he heard his friend's grim tone he knew it had to be bad. "No, what?"

"Renji and his squad," Asuma began as he lit a fresh cigarette. "They're all gone, K.I.A."

Kakashi grimaced; four new names were going on the memorial stone. He tried to picture Renji. A red head with tattoos on his face and neck. The Chunin had only been promoted by the Hokage a

year or so ago and was in his early twenties. He didn't know any of the Genin he'd been in charge of.

"What happened? It's pretty damn rare to lose a whole squad except in war time. Was he on some sort of special mission?"

Asuma shook his head. "That's the weird thing. They were in Wave protecting some bridge builder from bandits. Just a typical escort mission."

"So what happened?"

"No one knows. The Hokage's sent out an ANBU squad to investigate. There were no survivors and so no witnesses. All that's known so far is they and the client were ambushed along a road near his home."

"Bandits?" Kakashi asked sounding doubtful. Any Chunin was a match for at least fifty well armed men. Only a very large, or very desperate, group of outlaws would attack a squad of ninja.

"Doesn't look it," Asuma said and took a long drag from his cig. "There were no other bodies at the scene."

Kakashi nodded. Even if they were somehow caught by surprise and overwhelmed they would not have gone down easy. "Ninja then, maybe nuke nin."

Asuma nodded. "That's the assumption, but whoever did this was smart enough not to leave a calling card. We may never find out who was responsible."

Kakashi frowned but did not disagree. Wave country was largely swamp; by the time the ANBU arrived to investigate most of the physical evidence would be gone. Whoever did this would likely get away with it. As he drank with his friend Kakashi wondered what exactly had happened to Renji. Had they been targeted by people with a grudge against Konoha? Kami knew there were plenty of

those out there. Had they somehow just run across the wrong people at the wrong time? Had they been attacked by a group targeting their client? That seemed the least likely. Rogue ninja were expensive. Who in their right mind would spend that kind of money to kill a bridge builder?

In any case he took the news as a reminder that any mission could turn lethal at any time. He would make sure to keep an eye on his kids.

As Naruto locked the door to his apartment and headed to the gate he had a huge smile on his face.

Not one of the usual smiles that covered up the hurt and rage he felt, this was an honest smile. He was excited at the prospect of his first real mission and of the idea of actually *leaving* Konoha for

awhile.

When he'd been a child he'd often thought of running away. Of escaping this horrible place and all its cruelties. Some nights he would dream about it. The idea would fill him with hope and excitement. But he was always afraid too. He didn't know what was out there beyond the village walls. What if the people there all hated him too? And what if he left and never saw jiji again? The idea of leaving forever at once tempted and tormented him.

Arriving twenty minutes early he was glad to see he was the first to get there. The fifty foot high gates were open of course. Though it was early morning there was light traffic as carts and people on foot came and went. For a ninja village it was surprisingly easy for people to come and go. Merchants arrived all the time with the goods people demanded, local farmers came with the food people needed, and the civilians were free to come and go as they pleased.

Being a ninja he was not. He could not leave the village unless he was on a mission from the Hokage. Standing there his heart was

pounding. He could see the road that seemed to stretch out forever. He had no idea what Hikedo was like, but for him it seemed as foreign and exotic a place as Iwa or Suna. It was somewhere else, somewhere *different*, and the idea of going there and leaving this place for a time had him grinning from ear to ear.

About ten minutes later Sasuke and Sakura arrived together. Naruto had no doubt they had run into one another on the way here and Sakura had decided to tag along. Amazingly Sasuke actually looked to be in a good mood for once. He at least was tolerant and Sakura walked at his side. She was beaming, a content look was on her face and her eyes locked onto Sasuke.

Enjoy it while you can you dumb fan girl, his good moods never last long. When he'd finally given up on her he'd realized just how pathetic he must have appeared to everyone. He'd treated her the same way she treated Sasuke. He'd made a fool of himself again and again in the desperate hope that somehow or other it would win him some approval. It never did of course, and the more he'd done for her the worse she'd treated him. It was amusing to see the same happen to her now.

He could already tell what would happen. She would read too much into the fact he was willing to tolerate her right now. She would get her hopes up. Then later when he was back to his same old moody self she would be crushed to learn nothing had changed. *For someone who's supposed to be so smart she sure is a moron when it comes to him. Then again I wasn't any better.*

In an odd way he owed Mizuki his thanks. No matter how painful the experience he had finally learned the truth. Not just about what he was but that he could never hope to win people over. No matter how much it hurt it was still better to face the truth and deal with things as they were, not as you wanted them to be. *I guess that's part of growing up.*

He kept his thoughts well hidden and greeted his teammates. The three of them settled in for what they expected to be a two hour wait.

But to the amazement of the entire team Kakashi came strolling along book in hand at exactly 8.

"You're actually on time!" Sakura cried out.

"A mission from the Hokage is serious business and needs to be treated as such," Kakashi said pleasantly.

"Does that mean meeting us each day doesn't count as serious business?" Naruto asked.

"That's right," Kakashi said while reading his little orange book.

If looks could kill he'd have burst into flames there and then.

"All right team, let's go. Two days to get there, three for the festival, and two to come back," he walked out of the village with his team trailing him. "Try not to get lost or killed, okay?"

The two day trip there went by without incident. Kakashi had them sleep in their sleeping bags while keeping a watch. Naruto had offered to have his clones take care of all that, but as with their D-ranks Kakashi insisted that everyone do their part. Though they would just be acting as security Kakashi made a point of treating it like a serious mission. He wanted them to practice the same habits they would need on more important and more dangerous work.

Though Hikedo was designated a village, it was actually a prosperous small town of about 60,000. It was the capitol of its prefecture. Entering the village it was easy to see the preparations people were making. Streets were being swept clean and everywhere, on every door and window, people were displaying flowers or green branches. In the middle of the village there was a large open air market place that was crowded with stalls offering

different games and tasty foods. All the people were smiling and in a fine mood.

Naruto at first felt a little weird because the people here *weren't* glaring at him or ignoring him. When he stopped to think about it he realized that made sense. The people here didn't know who he was. To them he was just a kid with some weird scars. Having people smile at him and treat him the way they treated his teammates was definitely strange.

When you grow up being treated a certain way you just accept that's how things are, and how they are meant to be. Even if you hate it you just figure that if *everyone* is treating you that way it must be for some reason. His mind understood the reason for it now, but he still found he was so ingrained to being hated and ignored he had trouble accepting normal treatment.

Entering the village Kakashi had asked the local residents where he might find the mayor and had been directed to the open air market. There they found him. The mayor was a middle aged man with a wide belly dressed in plain work clothes. When they first saw him he had a hammer in his hand and was helping put a stand up.

"We don't worry much about formality here," mayor Binya told them. "Thank you for coming to provide security." He glanced at Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke worriedly. "I, uh, had expected your team to be made up of adults."

"There's no need for concern," Kakashi assured him. "Despite their ages all the members of my team are real ninja while I am an elite Jonin. I promise you we can handle things during your festival. We'll take care of crowd control and see to it no one causes trouble."

"Crowd control?" Binya blinked at him. "Our own police force can take care of that. That's not why you were hired."

Now Kakashi looked surprised. "I'm sorry, but the request was for security during the three days and nights of your festival. Was that a

mistake?"

"No, you *are* here to provide security for the next three days. But not for the festival."

Beneath his mask Kakashi frowned. "Then what are we providing security for?"

The mayor looked around nervously. "Please come with me."

Binya took them out of the village and into the nearby woods. About a couple miles from Hikedo they came to a modest wooden house with a small garden. He led them up the stone walkway and opened the door.

Inside was a room empty of any furnishing but a small mat. Hanging on the walls were portraits symbolizing various kami and earth spirits. Kneeling on the mat, and apparently deep in meditation, was a young girl of perhaps eight or nine. She was dressed in a white tunic and loose red pants of a priestess. Her long black hair was tied in a pony tail that ran halfway down her back. She remained where she was kneeling with her eyes closed, not noticing the opening of the door or the five sets of eyes that were watching her from it.

"Her name is Shizuku; she is our Priestess of the Spring." Binya whispered. "Your job is to protect her."

Kakashi's one visible eyebrow rose. "You went through the expense and trouble of hiring us just to protect a priestess for three days?"

Binya quietly slid the door shut again. "That is the time she will be in danger."

"Danger?"

Binya nodded solemnly. "I am afraid someone is going to try and murder her."

"Murder?" Sakura gasped.

Kakashi motioned her to be silent. "Has someone made a threat against her life?"

"You could say that, during each of the last seven festivals our Priestess of the Spring has been found brutally killed. And all of them were children around Shizuku's age."

"Seven murders?" Kakashi said.

Binya nodded.

"Do you have any suspects?"

"The entire village," the mayor said sadly.

Kakashi looked at him stonily. "You're going to have to explain that."

"Hikedo is a very *old* village with many old customs." The mayor looked down in shame. "Among them the custom of human sacrifice. In ancient times a pure and innocent child would be offered up to the spirits of the earth. A boon you might say, her life and blood in return for bountiful harvests and peace within our lands."

"A lot of places used to practice that, but the custom fell out of favor hundreds of years ago." Kakashi pointed out.

"The same was true here... until seven years ago. The land had suffered four years of bad crops. Drought, flood, hail, early frost, one natural disaster after another was slowly ruining the local farms and farmers. Then seven years ago during the Festival of Spring Renewal our priestess went missing. Each year one girl is selected to act as our Priestess of the Spring. She is brought here to live separate from her family for that time and to devote herself to prayer and meditation. She performs the ritual ceremonies of the festival and then is returned to her family and a new priestess is chosen. But seven years ago our priestess disappeared on the second night of

the festival." He shook his head sadly. "She was eventually found in the woods with her throat cut."

"Let me guess," Kakashi said coldly. "You had a bountiful harvest that fall."

Twitching the mayor nodded. "No one knows who is responsible, or how many people are involved. The people here don't talk about it."

"So basically it's one vast conspiracy?" Kakashi asked.

"More or less," Binya admitted.

"I can't believe people can still be that barbaric in this day and age." Sasuke said.

"Not everyone feels that way!" Binya said. "Most people here are disgusted by the murders, but it's impossible to tell who feels differently. Last year I had my entire police force guarding this place around the clock. But the priestess was still found dead, poisoned. It was impossible to tell when it was done or if it was done with the aid of people on the police force. But it was a possibility."

"So you suspect some of your police are part of the conspiracy?" Kakashi asked.

"That's right," Binya said. "That's why I decided to send for you. Only people from outside the village can be trusted to really protect her. The custom is that the sacrifice must be made during the time of the festival. Once it's over she will no longer be the priestess and so be safe."

"In that case why don't we just take her away somewhere for the next three days?" Kakashi offered.

But the mayor shook his head. "The priestess has to be the one to begin and conclude the festival and perform other ceremonies during

it. If she isn't here the festival can't take place and the entire village would erupt."

"She's a jinchuuriki," Naruto said quietly.

Kakashi looked at him nervously.

"What?" Binya asked. Naruto glared at him furiously and the mayo took a couple steps away from the boy.

"I said she's a jinchuuriki, she's a human sacrifice made for the good of this village," Naruto answered clearly. "You people don't give a damn whether she lives or dies so long as the village prospers right?"

"Naruto..." Kakashi said cautiously.

"Well she's not going to die! I'll protect her and make sure she lives. That's a promise!"

Sasuke and Sakura both looked on surprised by his intensity. It was almost as though he felt a personal connection to her for some reason.

Kakashi slowly nodded his head. "While Naruto is a bit more emotional about it than I would like I agree. We will protect her with our lives."

Priestess of the Spring

The air was filled with the sweet scent of flowers and the mouth watering aroma of meat cooking over an open flame. All around them the crowd was smiling and cheering. Little children sat on their parents' shoulders looking on at the procession. The grownups were dressed in their best yukatas making them as colorful as the parade. They were in bright colors, greens and purples and reds and yellows and of course orange. Everyone looked so happy, they were all cheering and clapping their hands as their Priestess of the Spring slowly walked past. She was preceded and followed by school children in their own bright yukatas. The children carried tree branches and flowers, symbols of spring renewal. No one seemed to make a big deal about the twenty orange clad ninja who walked along keeping the priestess surrounded at all times. Each Naruto kept his eyes scanning the crowd and the roof top for any possible threat.

He spotted some movement on a roof and tensed. He relaxed when he saw it was just the teme. Sasuke and Sakura would keep an eye from the roofs while he was the one who stayed near Shizuku. Kakashi was somewhere in the crowd in a henge. Naruto picked up his scent and knew he was moving along with the procession but had no idea which face was his. Their job was to protect Shizuku for these three days and they were all serious about keeping her safe.

Flashback

Shizuku was looking calmly at the four ninja who had come to keep her safe. Binya had introduced them to her and explained that they would be staying at the shrine during the festival to protect her. The mayor had then excused himself to return to his carpentry.

The little priestess had accepted their arrival with a serenity that caught them all off guard.

"I understand that you will be staying here in the shrine," she said quietly. She smiled at them innocently, a child's smile. "No one else ever stays here with me. Nori comes and teaches me and Momo cooks for me, but otherwise I am always alone. I think it will be nice to have company."

"Do you ever have contact with anyone other than your caretaker and your teacher?" Kakashi asked.

The little girl shook her head. "Everyone else stays away from here and I am not supposed to leave the shrine."

"You must get really lonely," Naruto said in a soft voice.

Shizuku looked at him. "Not really, I meditate and pray to pass the time. I know what I am doing is important to the village so I don't mind it."

Naruto was very surprised to find he actually believed her. There was not a whiff of resentment coming off her. He knew how hard it was to be all alone so he couldn't begin to understand how she could be all right with it.

"Don't you have any friends? Anyone you can talk to?" He asked.

Kakashi glanced at Naruto silently.

"I have only Nori and Momo," she said. "I... have a mother I have not seen since I became priestess. I would... I would really like to be with kaasan again. But that is not for me to decide."

"What do you mean?"

"Whether or not I see kaasan again is karma. What will be will be, I cannot change it but only accept it."

"Then you understand the reason why we are here?" Kakashi asked carefully.

She simply nodded. "I know that the seven priestesses before me were all sacrificed, and that you are here to try and prevent that from happening to me as well."

"How can you be so calm about it?" Sakura blurted out. "Some people out there want to kill you! Why aren't you scared?"

"Because I have been taught to accept whatever fate is meant for me. Whatever my karma is I accept it," she said tranquilly.

"What if your karma is to be murdered in the next three days?" Naruto asked. "Would you just accept that?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well you know what? Fuck karma!"

"Naruto!" Sakura said sharply. "You can't say that to her!"

"Why not? It's what I honestly feel."

"You cannot oppose what is meant to be," Shizuku told him politely. She did not seem offended or bothered by what he had just said.

"We must all bend before the wind. To resist fate only causes suffering. Do you not believe in karma?"

"Hell no," he said with a sneer. "'Cause, my karma was to die all alone hated by everyone. If I was going to pay attention to what fate or kami or whoever planned for me I'd have laid down and died a long time ago. But I decided instead that I was going to be Hokage one day. Not because it was my karma but because it was what I wanted. That's my dream and I'll make it come true no matter what it takes!"

Shizuku's eyes widened a bit at the passion and fervor of his words. "But... but aren't you afraid of what will happen if you oppose what fate has in store for you? Whenever a soul opposes its natural destiny only suffering can come as a result."

"So what?" Naruto asked. "Life is filled with suffering anyway. If I have to suffer anyway it might as well be to fulfill my dream. What's your dream?"

"What?" She asked in confusion.

"What's your dream?" He repeated. "What is it you want from life?"

She looked a little nervous, a little unsure of herself. "I... I don't have a dream; I am ready to accept whatever comes."

"Come on, everyone has a dream, everyone has something they want." He pointed at Sasuke. "The teme there wants to kill a certain man and restore his clan."

"Hn." Sasuke said with a slight frown.

He pointed at Sakura. "She wants to have the teme fall in love with her and give him a whole herd of little pink haired kids."

"Hey!"

He pointed at Kakashi. "He just wants to spend the rest of his life doing nothing but reading porn."

Kakashi shrugged. "Well that's true."

"As for me I'm going to be Hokage and rule my village." He gave her a big triumphant smile. "So what do you want?"

She looked down and squirmed a little. "It is selfish to have personal desires."

"Maybe I guess, but *everyone* has them. Isn't there something you want?"

She was silent for awhile.

"I want to be with momma again," she said in a small voice. "I just want to be with momma again."

Naruto nodded. "That's a good dream, if that's what you want you have to be willing to fight for it." He stepped forward and she felt him press something into her hand. It was cold and hard.

When she saw what it was she dropped it and stepped back in horror. The kunai fell to the wooden floor with a small clang.

"I am a priestess! I cannot carry a weapon! I am sworn to harm no living thing!"

"Even if they want to harm you?" He picked it up off the floor and held it out to her. "If you really want to be with your mother again, if that's your dream, you have to be willing to fight for it."

"Naruto, she's a priestess, she's not like us." Sakura pointed out. "It's our job to protect because we're the ninja; we're the ones who have been taught to fight."

"I know that Sakura-chan, and I don't plan on any danger getting anywhere near her. But just in case, she should be willing to protect herself if it comes down to that." Naruto continued to hold the kunai out to her. "Dreams don't come true just because you wish for them; you have to *fight* to make them real."

"Naruto actually brings up a valid point," Kakashi said. "While we will do everything in our power to protect you and keep you safe it would still be a good idea to be armed."

"I cannot do violence to any living thing," she said firmly.

"Then... then use it to make them think twice." Naruto said. "If it comes to it pull it out and shout for help. Maybe just seeing you're armed will buy you a few seconds. You can at least do that right?"

She thought of it. "I... I suppose I could. But to even carry a weapon..."

"It's only for three days," Naruto said warmly and slipped the kunai into a wide pocket on her trousers. "I'm sure kami or fate or whatever will forgive you."

"I... I suppose," she said but continued to look troubled.

Walking along the parade route the original Naruto was the one closest to her. If anything happened he wanted to be at her side ready to act.

As they walked Shizuku looked up at him, she was about six inches shorter than he was. "Naruto, why do you care so much?"

"Huh?"

The girl smiled at his obvious confusion. "I am just curious why you care so much. Your sensei and your teammates want to protect me, but while they are very sincere in their efforts I can tell it is a mission for them. They will protect me because it is their job. If their job were to kill me they would try and do it just as well, right? That is how ninja are I believe?"

Naruto rubbed the back of his head in discomfort. "Well... if it was the mission we would sort of have to. We have to obey the orders of the Hokage and you usually don't get to pick and choose which missions you're assigned. We're not supposed to ever let things be personal."

"But you do," she said softly. "You really care about protecting me in a way the others don't. Why is that?"

"It's because I understand your situation," he told her. "I know what it's like to be a living sacrifice for a village and have them not even care." He looked at the cheering crowd. "They acknowledge you,

they cheer for you, but how many of them would be sorry if you were to die so long as the village had a nice harvest? Sure, they care about *that*, but do any of them care about *you* and what you have to sacrifice for their sakes? Not damn likely."

"But aren't ninja expected to lay down their lives for their village? People don't appreciate that?"

Naruto shook his head. "I'm not talking about being a ninja. People respect ninja where I come from and the ones who die in service to the village have their names carved into a memorial, they are remembered. But I *chose* to become a ninja; I never *chose* to be a sacrifice."

"What do you mean?" She asked. "How are you a sacrifice?"

Knowing he'd said too much he quickly smiled and shook his head. "Ah, never mind, forget I said that. The point is I understand what it's like to be where you are now and I want to protect you. I want you to live and have your dream. I want you to get to be with your kaasan, and I'll make sure it happens. That's a promise and I never break a promise, that's my nindo, my ninja way."

Looking up at him Shizuku smiled warmly. "Karma will decide if that happens, but thank you for trying to protect me." She placed a hand on his arm. "I'm an only child and my father died when I was very young. I always wanted to have an older brother who would protect me and watch out for me. If I'd had one I would want him to be just like you Naruto."

"Really?" For someone who had spent his whole life abused and unwanted hearing that meant a lot to him.

"Really," she said. "Would it be all right if I called you oniisan while you are here? Even if it's just for the festival I would like to pretend I have an older brother."

"Sure!" He said in genuine happiness. It was strange how such a small thing could mean so much to him.

"Then please take care of me niisan."

"I will," he said solemnly and placed a gentle hand over hers. *I'll keep you safe no matter what.*

An ordinary village

That first day went really well.

There was no sign of trouble. Shizuku performed the opening ceremony to a loud chorus of cheers. She then performed a few other ceremonies before returning to the shrine with Naruto and Kakashi.

"I want you two to remain here at the festival for the rest of the day and enjoy yourselves," Kakashi said.

"You mean it sensei!" Sakura said excitedly.

"What about the mission?" Sasuke asked. "How can it be all right for us to waste time when there's a job to do?"

"This *is* part of your mission," Kakashi said. "Go through the festival and see if there's anything unusual going on. See if there are any unusual characters about."

"You mean besides us?" Sasuke asked dryly.

"Oh come on Sasuke-kun it's a reconnaissance mission!" She put her arm through his. "And we can pretend it's a date!"

Before Sasuke could freeze her solid with a just a few words Kakashi cut him off. "That's a fine idea! You two pretend to be a couple enjoying the festival. Don't return to the shrine until it ends." Kakashi chuckled as he fled.

I really wish he would be more serious about things! Sasuke thought. He turned to see Sakura still holding on to him, her eyes somehow filling most of her face. "Don't get any weird ideas Sakura; I'm only doing this because it's part of the mission."

"I understand Sasuke-kun," she said. *Cha! My very first date with Sasuke-kun! Just wait until I tell Ino-pig she'll be so jealous.*

Kakashi caught up to Shizuku and Naruto who were surrounded by a wide circle of twenty clones. As usual he had his little orange book out and was reading it.

"What kind of book is that?" Shizuku asked.

"Eh?" Kakashi looked up from his reading material.

"What kind of book is that?" Shizuku repeated. She squinted her eyes a bit. "Come, come paradise? That's an odd title."

Having an eight year old questioning him about what he was reading was a bit embarrassing. The fact she was an actual priestess made it worse. "Ah, well, you see..."

"It's a dirty book that he reads all the time," Naruto told her matter of factly. "Kakashi's just a huge perv."

"Thanks Naruto," Kakashi said wryly.

"What? You are aren't you?"

Shizuku shook her head sadly. "Shouldn't a teacher set a good example for his students Kakashi-san? It really isn't good to immerse yourself in impure thoughts, that can lead to immoral behavior... as well as hairy palms and blindness."

"Hey," Naruto said. "Is *that* how come you only have one eye?"

Kakashi sweat dropped and put his book away. *I'm really losing a lot of face here.*

"Here you go kids, enjoy." The vendor handed each of them an ice cream cone.

"Arigato!" The little blonde girl said.

"Thank you," an unhappy dark haired boy said. They both had henges on to appear like ordinary children. A place of this size there was no way people would know everyone.

They walked away from the vendor and along the crowded street. It was sunset now and the crowds were a little sparser, many people had gone off to eat or rest. After the sun went down there would be music as various bands would begin to play and couple would dance to the music.

"This has got to be the all time best mission ever," Sakura said. In one hand she had her ice cream and in the other she had Sasuke's arm. And if that wasn't perfect enough they were in the middle of a festival. How could anything ever top this?

Sasuke looked at her and at her hand on his arm. Though he didn't really like the closeness he let it be since the alternative was to have her weeping and miserable. That would draw attention, at least this way they just looked like a couple kids enjoying themselves. "Just so long as you don't forget this *is* a mission Sakura."

"Oh I haven't forgotten Sasuke-kun, but I haven't seen anything even a little suspicious. Have you?"

"No."

She giggled a little. "You sound disappointed."

"This is our first real mission Sakura," he told her sternly. "Our first chance to do something with our skills. I want to succeed, and succeed brilliantly. There's no way to do that if we can't even find the enemy."

"But what if there's no enemy?" She asked. "Or what the enemy gave up as soon as they saw their target being protected by ninja. I mean look around, these are just normal people. I'm sure most of

them had nothing to do with the murders. There were probably just a few sickos among them. So long as we keep our eyes open I'm sure Shizuku will be safe."

Sasuke did look at the people around them. Children and parents, grandparents, and young couples walked past oblivious and happy. These people weren't any different from the civilians back home. They wouldn't be any sort of threat to real ninja. "I guess that's possible."

"Yeah! Which means you can take me dancing!"

"Dancing?"

Sakura laughed and hugged his arm. "It's part of the mission, right Sasuke-kun?"

He let out a defeated grunt. *Worst mission ever.*

That night Kakashi, Naruto, and Shizuku had dinner bought at the various stalls by Kakashi. The food already in the shrine's small back kitchen had been unceremoniously thrown away. Since the last victim had been poisoned the possibility that the food could already have been doctored had to be considered.

"I wish we had ramen," Naruto complained as he had some fried squid.

"Ramen isn't very good for you niisan," Shizuku said primly. "I mostly eat rice with some fish and vegetables."

Naruto made a face. "I hate vegetables."

"You should still eat them, they are good for you." She looked at Kakashi. "Tomorrow could we get some vegetables to eat too?"

Kakashi nodded. "Sure that's no problem at all. I've actually been trying to get him to eat more than just ramen myself."

"He comes by my apartment sometimes with bags filled with green stuff," Naruto shivered.

"They're good for you niisan."

"But I hate them!"

Kakashi ate his dinner quietly and listened to the byplay between them.

Following dinner a couple of Naruto's clones cleaned up as Shizuku began her evening prayers.

"Naruto, come and take a walk with me for a bit, there's something we need to discuss."

Outside the shrine the two of them strolled along. Naruto had already set twenty of his clones to act as guards and hidden them in the nearby trees and shrubs. Even while he and his sensei were off talking she remained under protection.

"So what's going on sensei?"

"Naruto," Kakashi said in a low voice. "I think you're getting a little too involved with our client."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"A ninja's first and only true loyalty should be to his village Naruto," Kakashi said quietly. "While on a mission we are loyal to our client. We will do everything in our power to protect our client, even lay down our lives. But when the mission is over we return to our village. For people like us Naruto it's very dangerous to make attachments outside the village. We care about our village and about our

comrades, but we can't care too much for the people we are sent out to protect."

Naruto came to a halt and looked up at him. "Why not? Shizuku is a really good person and I like her! Except for jiji she's been nicer to me than anyone I've ever known!"

"I agree that she's a very nice person Naruto, and that she is very kind to you. Never the less you can't afford to care too much."

"How come?" Naruto demanded.

"None of us can know what the future holds Naruto," Kakashi told him. "Someone we protect today could be a target tomorrow." Seeing a look of outrage Kakashi waved his hands signaling him to relax. "Not that I expect there's any chance of that in *this* situation, but it's not a good idea to get into the habit of becoming really close to people outside the village. A ninja should never have divided loyalties. He should always know exactly where his loyalties lie."

"I know who I'm loyal to," Naruto said. "I'm loyal to the old man!"

"And what would you do if the Hokage ordered you to come back here one day and assassinate her? Hmmm?"

"The old man would never do something like that!"

"But what if he did?" Kakashi asked. "Killing people, even innocent people, is a regular part of a ninja's life. As a leaf ninja you must be ready at any time to carry out any mission given to you, even one that involves people you already know. As a matter of fact you might get the mission *because* you know them and can get closer to them more easily. So *if* the Hokage were to order you to kill her someday what would you do?"

Naruto crossed his arms over his chest and glared up defiantly. He did not answer.

"That's about what I thought," Kakashi said. "It's fine for now, like I said I can't imagine the scenario where anything like this would ever happen. But remember what I told you for the future."

"Don't care about anyone outside the village, got it."

"Don't care *too* much. You'll meet a lot of people during your career and the connections you make can be very valuable to you. Making friends with your clients is just fine, as long as you understand your loyalty belongs only to the village."

"So I should be ready to betray any friends I make who aren't from Konoha?"

"That's a rather harsh way of putting it Naruto."

"But that's what you mean right?"

Kakashi nodded. "More or less."

Sasuke and Sakura returned a little after ten. Other than Sakura gushing about what a marvelous dancer Sasuke was there was nothing for them to report. So far as any of them could tell there was nothing out of the ordinary about Hikedo or its festival. The first full day of their mission had gone well.

The trouble began late that night.

Long after they had put out the lights and gone to bed five figures dressed in black moved through the woods. With blades in hand they approached the shrine.

Something every ninja should know

Five men dressed in black moved through the woods to the edge of the clearing surrounding the shrine. They huddled together and looked over the darkened shrine. Even with its lights off they could see it clearly thanks to the moon.

"Remember, there are ninja in there. We need to be careful." One of the men whispered.

"Is this a good idea?" Another asked.

"It has to be done," the first one said.

"What if the ninja are awake?" A different man said nervously.

"It's three in the morning, I'm sure they're all asleep."

"You're sure of that are you?" An amused voice said from the tree branches just above them.

All five of the would be assassins gasped and looked up. There was an adult sitting calmly on a tree branch with a book in his hand. Near him on other branches were three identical blond boys, all well hidden.

"Even in a nice quiet town like this we *do* still post a guard just in case." He snapped shut his book and put it away. "I don't suppose you'd like to just give up now?"

He was answered by a shout and a throwing knife.

The knife came nowhere near him. In the blink of an eye he was on the ground in the middle of them. A few punches, a couple kicks and it was all over. All five of them were unconscious. The three kage bunshins jumped down and looked upset.

"No fair sensei! I didn't get the chance to do anything!"

"Don't complain Naruto, it won't always be that easy. I just wanted to see for myself the level of the opposition."

Looking at the prone bodies he snorted. "They weren't much."

Beneath his mask Kakashi frowned. "No, they weren't, and that's what scares me."

"What do you mean? Isn't that a good thing?"

Squatting down near a couple of the unconscious men he nodded to them. "Look closely Naruto and tell me what you see."

Not understanding Naruto looked them over not sure what he was supposed to be looking for. "I just see five men who came here to attack Shizuku and got beat up instead."

"You're not looking underneath the underneath Naruto." He reached out and pulled up a jacket one of them men had on. "These men aren't in ninja gear or in any sort of armor. They're all wearing different kinds of work and casual clothes. Look at their weapons," he pointed to them. "A couple short swords, a couple axes, some throwing knives, and even a couple kitchen knives and cleavers. Now what does all this tell you?"

Naruto shrugged. "That they're not ninja or even real soldiers, they're probably just civilians who used whatever they had."

Kakashi nodded. "That's part of it, but it also means something else that is very troubling."

"What?"

"It means these men were very likely volunteers rather than members of an organization."

"How can you tell that?"

"The kunai and shuriken you have in your pouch are they better or worse than the ones Sasuke or Sakura have?"

"They're the same, I bought them in the same standard everyone else does." *Though I had to pay about three times as much.*

Kakashi nodded. "While many ninja have personalized weapons all leaf ninja use the same basic kunai and shuriken because they are an *organizational standard*. Groups that work together closely will invariably develop certain common traits. But none of these men dressed alike or even brought the same weapons."

"So?"

"So that would indicate they were assigned the job or volunteered for it and provided what they thought they would need themselves."

"I still don't see what the problem is."

"If these men were volunteers or assigned this job at random even though they apparently hadn't worked or trained together that suggests there was a *large* body to select from doesn't it? Up until now I'd thought this was a small group of religious fanatics. What if we're dealing with something much larger?"

Naruto thought about the implications and didn't like them. "It doesn't matter; I'll keep her safe no matter how many people threaten her."

Kakashi nodded. "Yes we will," he grabbed two men and tossed one over each shoulder. "In the meanwhile I have something to take care of." He looked over to the Naruto he'd been talking to. "I'll handle this part on my own."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm just going to ask them a few questions," Kakashi said pleasantly.

The clone looked calmly back at him. "You're going to torture them."

"Only if I have to, and only as much as I have to, we need some information and time isn't on our side. A lot of what a ninja does isn't pretty and isn't glorious, but it's necessary."

"Let me watch," Naruto said in a deathly serious voice.

"I don't think this is something you need to see yet."

"It's necessary for a ninja though isn't it? It's something I'll have to learn about eventually right?" Naruto demanded. "I know you don't like to teach me anything sensei, but just this once why don't you make an exception?"

Kakashi saw the look in Naruto's eyes. It was a look he'd seen many times, but never in anyone so young. "Why do you want to learn about torture?" Kakashi asked quietly.

"No special reason," he said with a false smile. "Just thought it might come in handy someday."

Several times Kakashi had wondered just what was there beneath that mask he used. Naruto played the happy idiot well. So well in fact many people accepted the persona without question. But Kakashi was nothing if not observant. He'd watched both Naruto and Sasuke very carefully and had serious concerns about both.

He suspected that both boys were being consumed by rage and a desire for revenge. Naruto hid this while Sasuke didn't bother to. Every now and again Naruto would let his mask slip and reveal something very scary. Of the two of them Naruto worried him the most because he was so determined to keep his true nature hidden.

"All right," Kakashi answered. "If you really want to see that's fine, pick up the other three and follow me."

Naruto nodded and three clones picked up three men before following Kakashi deeper into the woods away from the shrine.

"Hi there!"

The man slowly opened his eyes. He found himself staring into a masked face with some crazy hair and one eye covered up.

And the face was upside down.

It took a moment for him to realize he was the one upside down. He looked about and saw he was tied up and being suspended over a small stream. "What... what's going on?"

"That's my line," Kakashi told him. "By the way my name is Hatake Kakashi and I'm a ninja from Konoha. Who might you be?"

The man clamped down his teeth and stared back defiantly.

"Not going to answer my questions, eh? I understand, and I want you to know I respect your loyalty to your comrades." Kakashi released a rope he'd been holding in his right hand.

The man fell into the water below. Caught by surprise he'd been gasping and had not thought to hold his breath. As soon as he hit the water he took in a mouthful of water and started to choke. His instincts took over and he thrashed about trying to free himself. His arms and legs were bound tight though so it was all just wasted motion.

The air left his mouth and nose and the water poured in, he could feel the water fill his nose and throat as he tried to breath. Terror filled him as all he could see was murky water. Then just as he thought he was really going to drown the roped around his ankles tightened and he was hauled up out of the water.

As his prisoner coughed and gagged Kakashi patiently waited. There was no point in talking until the man had a chance to recover a bit. When the coughing passed and he was breathing normally Kakashi spoke. "But while I admire your loyalty I have a job to do. I need you to answer all my questions and answer them truthfully. I promise you

that if you do that you won't be harmed. If you don't I can't answer for what may happen here."

"You... you can't do that, I'm a citizen of Fire country."

Without a word Kakashi let go of the rope again.

This time the man managed to take a breath and shut his mouth. That didn't stop the water trickling in through his nose though. And before long he could feel his lungs aching. He finally opened his mouth and the water came in again. He struggled like a fish on a hook but couldn't get his head out of the water. Again just as it seemed he was really going to die he felt himself being yanked up out of the water.

Watching cough and gag and then desperately breathe in the air Kakashi knew this wouldn't take long. Very few people could last any amount of time under torture. Unless you were someone trained to endure pain and who was willing to die. (Like a ninja.)

"I am a representative of the Lord Hokage on a mission and charged to complete that mission by whatever means necessary. I am not answerable to you, your village, or even to the Fire Daimyo himself. The only one I must answer to is the Lord Hokage. And if I have to kill a few pieces of garbage like you to protect my client I will. Now, let's try again, who are you?"

"My... my name is Jibo."

"A pleasure to meet you Jibo. Now please tell me who you are working with."

Naruto watched as Kakashi dropped the man into the water for a third time. It was interesting watching Kakashi go. Whenever people had hurt him it had always been with anger. Watching someone inflict a measured amount of suffering without even a speck of anger was definitely different. Naruto watched and listened as the man

began to talk about everything he knew. He required no more dunkings, his spirit seemed broken. *Is that all it takes to break someone?* He thought contemptuously. He thought off all the beatings, all the threats, all the cruelty he'd been forced to swallow at so many hands. If he were the sort to break so easily he'd have committed suicide long ago.

When Kakashi finally had all his answers he knocked the prisoner out and brought his soaking wet body over to a tree where he was tied up and gagged. Kakashi then went and retrieved another prisoner. He had tied each one to a different tree a good ways from here. They would have no chance to talk to each other or hear what their friend had already answered. Each prisoner was tortured, their answers expanded his information and either confirmed or called into doubt what he'd been told.

Naruto found the lesson very instructive.

Through all this the shrine remained under the watchful eyes of Naruto's clones. By the time Kakashi was done the clones who had accompanied him dispelled themselves giving their original all the information.

The real Naruto woke up knowing everything that had happened. He crawled over to Sasuke and Sakura and shook them awake.

"What is it Naruto?" Sakura asked in a bleary voice. Looking out the window she saw it was still pitch dark outside. "Geez, what time is it?"

"Was there a reason you woke us up dobe?" Sasuke asked.

"Yeah teme, we had visitors during the night and we're going to have more of them this morning."

Sasuke came fully awake and looked very interested. "What are you talking about?"

"Kakashi-sensei will explain everything but we need to get up and get ready."

A few hours later it was morning and the sun was up above the horizon. Shizuku and Sakura were the only ones still inside the shrine. Sakura hadn't wanted to be here, she'd wanted to be outside with Sasuke-kun and the others. Kakashi though had ordered her to remain here and keep an eye on Shizuku.

"Will it be all right?" Shizuku asked nervously.

Sakura nodded her head forcefully. "It will be fine; Kakashi-sensei, Sasuke-kun, and even Naruto can all take care of themselves. And I'll make sure nothing happens to you." Despite her smile she was filled with doubt. *Cha, I'm the weakest and sensei knows it too! That's why he's keeping me out of the way.*

Outside the shrine Kakashi, Sasuke, and Naruto all waited. For once the two teammates wore similar expressions; they both had looks of eager anticipation. Kakashi was standing there calmly reading his book. With or without the mask it would have been impossible to know what he was thinking.

Naruto suddenly turned to him. "One of my clones just dispelled, they're coming, and they should be here pretty soon."

Kakashi slowly nodded. Naruto's shadow clone technique was really useful in all sorts of ways. He closed his book and put it away. "How many of them are there?"

"I counted a hundred," Naruto said.

"You can count that high?" Sasuke asked.

"Shut up teme," Naruto grunted.

Kakashi sighed. "Just remember, we just need to stop them. Don't use lethal force unless it's necessary."

Naruto noticed Sasuke shake a little. "You afraid bastard?"

Sasuke looked at him with a rare grin. "I'm shivering from excitement dead last."

"Well this should definitely be exciting," Kakashi said.

About ten minutes later they saw a long line of men approaching them. About half of them wore leather jerkins covered by coats with badges pinned to them. Each of them wore a short sword similar to the ones two of their prisoners had used. The rest of the crowd approaching them wore different sorts of outfits and carried a wide variety of weapons ranging from axes to spears to swords and even sickles. They came up to the edge of the clearing and stopped. Kakashi, Naruto and Sasuke were all standing there calmly.

One of the men who wore a badge spoke up. "I am captain Hotaka, commander of the Hikedo police force. We've had word of an incident last night."

"That's interesting," Kakashi noted. "Especially since no one's contacted the police about what happened here this morning."

Hotaka frowned but pressed on. "Mayor Binya has decided that it would be best to leave the priestess's safety in our hands."

"Really? He went to the trouble of hiring us in the first place because he didn't trust his own police force with protecting her."

"The mayor has since had a change of heart," Hotaka told him. "We realize we have wasted your time and apologize for that. We will still pay for the full cost of your services, but we'd like you to leave now."

"I am afraid that would be impossible," Kakashi said. "My team and I were dispatched here to complete a mission and that is exactly what

I intend to do."

"Your mission is over now; we'll take care of the girl."

"Her name is Shizuku!" Naruto said angrily. "If you're going to talk about her at least use her name!"

Sasuke looked over in surprise while Kakashi gave no reaction. "I am afraid you don't have the authority to cancel this mission," Kakashi said. "I think it would be best for you and your men if they turned around and left."

"I can't do that," Hotaka said and placed a hand on his short sword.

That appeared to be a signal as behind him weapons were drawn and readied.

"Stand aside or me and my men will use force," Hotaka said.

"You and your men are welcome to try."

At a signal the men shouted and ran forward.

Whatever it takes

The men all gave a shout and came on, weapons ready. As they did so Naruto's jumped down from the nearby trees among them. Instantly everything dissolved into one wild melee.

Three men with badges and short swords were on Kakashi at the start. These men were strong and healthy and from the way they moved it was clear they'd had at least a little practice with their swords. From the looks in their eyes it was also clear they were deadly serious about reaching their target.

For someone like Kakashi all that meant very little. The challenge for him wasn't in defeating these men but in doing so without seriously injuring them. In a blur two fists smashed into unprotected faces while the third was hit in the side of the head with a kick. All three attackers went down in under three seconds.

Despite this show of strength and martial skill other men came at him with swords and axes, desperate to bring the Jonin down by sheer force of numbers. Kakashi had no doubts he could handle any number of these people, but they *did* get between him and his students.

Sasuke was surrounded by four men, all of them at least a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier and armed. The Uchiha was smiling, his heart was pounding, and for the first time in years he felt really truly *alive*. Here was a chance to actually do something, to fight a real battle against a real enemy.

The man in front of him screamed and swung an axe aiming to split his skull in half. Too slow, Sasuke stepped forward into the arc of his swing and delivered a pair of rabbit punches to the man's kidneys

that doubled him up. He had no chance to do more as someone else stabbed at him with a spear.

A single chop of his hand broke off the metal head. Grabbing the wooden staff he drove it forward through his opponent's lax grip. The butt end of the spear slammed into his stomach. With a loud, 'oof' he fell over clutching his belly.

From behind two more men came at him with swords swinging. These two had enough sense to come at him as a team. As one stabbed the other tried to get behind him. Sasuke was forced to dodge and jump back as the second man's sword came close to cutting him. For civilians they were pretty fast.

Then something strange happened. For no reason he could see they slowed down. Not only did they slow down he could see just where they were aiming their strikes. Taking out a kunai he blocked one attack and delivered a kick to the side of the man's knee. He went down in a heap and wouldn't be standing, let alone fighting again anytime soon. His friend ran in stabbing at Sasuke's chest. The move was ridiculously obvious as Sasuke could see it coming. He easily dodged and delivered a punch to the side of his jaw that ended the fight.

Four men lay at his feet unconscious or otherwise disabled. It was just as Sasuke had always known it would be, they were no match for him. He waded into the crowd eager for more battle.

Oblivious to the fact his sharingan was now active.

"Come on!" Naruto screamed. His fist slammed into a man's chest and he could feel ribs break. He was the Kyuubi, his speed and physical strength were greater than they should have been, as was his ferocity. The man he hit cried out and dropped his sword backing away from him. Naruto didn't hesitate; he delivered a punch that busted open the man's mouth and sent blood and teeth flying. With him down he looked around for someone else to fight.

He and his clones were cutting loose, fighting with a wild abandon. Naruto was discovering that he really *liked* fighting. He actually enjoyed bloodshed, the sight of it, the metallic smell of it, it was wonderful! *This is what I was born for!* He thought as a punch slammed into a man's back, bringing him down without warning. *I'm the Kyuubi and this is my nature!* In the midst of fighting he found an odd sort of peace. He didn't have to pretend to be something he was not; he could let his nature come out. He could show them the monster he was slowly becoming. Normally he was surrounded by nothing but lies and deception, everyone pretending to be something else, himself included. On the battlefield though you got to see what someone really was.

All through the fighting he had held back from using lethal force as Kakashi had instructed. He *wanted* to kill though, wanted to see and taste more blood. He wanted to be buried in that wonderful scent. But he held back. He couldn't reveal too much of the real him, not yet. So he looked around for someone new to fight.

And by chance saw two men who had gotten behind them in the confusion and were kicking down the shrine's door.

They could both hear the sounds of the fight raging outside. The two girls had locked the one and only door and covered the windows. They both waited in silence as they heard but did not see what was going on just outside.

Without warning the wooden burst open, shards of wood sent flying from the broken lock. Two men with leather jerkins and badges rushed in with swords drawn and murder in their eyes.

"Get behind me Shizuku!" Sakura cried and gripped a kunai in both hands while putting herself between the intruders and her client.

This was it, this was the moment she had strived for, worked for, learned all the ninja rules for. She was in a life and death situation, she was acting like a real ninja.

And it was only at this moment that she had a horrible epiphany; she was scared. These two men wanted to kill her. They didn't give a damn who she was or if she was the girl best suited to be with Sasuke. All they saw was an enemy they had to get through to reach their objective. Her heart was pounding and she couldn't keep her knees from shaking. Somehow during all the years at the academy as she had focused on her pursuit of Sasuke and on being the best in academics she had never thought about *this* side of being a ninja. That was absurd, that anyone could spend years striving to be a ninja and never once wonder about the reality of a life and death fight. Such violence was the reason ninja and ninja villages existed.

Yet whenever she would imagine herself going on missions her thoughts always revolved around her amazing Sasuke with her skills. The idea that one day she would have to kill or be killed never really registered.

Until now.

As the men came at her howling she was half a step too slow. Her fear led to hesitation, and her hesitation led to what she feared. With her kunai she managed to deflect one of the swords, but was unable to get out of the way of the second. Her eyes widened as the tip of the second blade went into the soft flesh just below her right shoulder and sunk in deep.

"Aaaaaah!" Her cry of terror belonged to a twelve year old girl, not to a ninja. She jerked back and the sword came out of her. Pain engulfed her shoulder as her right arm no longer wanted to work. She saw and felt the hot blood flow from her gash and darken her red dress.

"Sakura!" Shizuku called out.

As Sakura stumbled back the two men did not hesitate. They did not offer her a chance to surrender or say a word they came on wanting to finish her as quick as they could and take care of the priestess. *I'm going to die!* Sakura realized with a sudden clarity. All those book

smarts she prided herself on, all the good looks that were so important to her, none of them mattered now. She was too weak, and now she was going to pay for it.

"Stop!!!" A voice screamed from the door. Before her eyes there was an orange blur. Just as the two men were turning to face their new attacker she saw a glint of steel. She stood there and just watched as Naruto slammed one kunai into the side of a man's throat all the way to the handle. In the same instant the kunai in his other hand went into the side of the other man's skull with an audible, 'chunck' sound that was exactly like when a kunai when into a wooden training post.

The man with the kunai in his head dropped to the floor and jerked and flopped around like a fish until he went still. The one with the knife through his throat dropped his sword and clutched at his bleeding throat. Naruto pulled out another kunai and viciously began stabbing the man in his chest. He didn't just stab him once, or twice, he stabbed him and stabbed him and stabbed him. Even after fifteen of so, with him lying motionless on the floor in an expanding pool of blood he kept right on stabbing, a huge smile on his face his eyes *alive* and filled with an immense joy.

" **Stop it!!**" Shizuku screamed. "Naruto for the love of kami stop!!!"

Hearing Shizuku scream Naruto jerked to a halt with the kunai halfway down to another stab. He looked and saw the horror on Shizuku's face. His own face and clothes were spattered in blood. His weapon and his right hand were drenched in it.

The smile and the look of excitement faded. Naruto refused to break eye contact with her. "I did what I had to." As if coming out of a daze he looked around the shrine and hurried over to Sakura. He pulled out some gauze from one of his pouches and bound up her wound.

Shizuku kept a fearful distance and never took her eyes off of him.

The fight lasted roughly five minutes. The final outcome was never really in doubt. When Kakashi entered the shrine and saw what was there he cursed himself for letting his guard down. He'd been confident that he and the two boys would be more than a match for a hundred civilians. Because of that confidence he had very nearly lost both one of his students and their client.

"Naruto-kun saved my life, and Shizuku's too." Sakura said

Kakashi nodded. "I'm proud of you Naruto; you did exactly what any good ninja should. Your use of deadly force was proper and necessary. You defended your comrade and your client, when we get back I'll put in a special commendation in your file." Kakashi decided not to mention the fact that one of the men killed had obviously been savaged beyond any possible need. Ninja had to be willing to kill without hesitation, but to commit such butchery suggested a violent and uncontrolled nature. That was *extremely* troubling, but this was not the time to try and deal with it.

"Thanks sensei," Naruto replied and turned a gentle gaze to Sakura who was lying on a mat. "I'm just glad I got here in time to help Sakura-chan and Shizuku." *You're worthless Sakura! Shizuku almost died because you couldn't even handle two civilians. You call yourself a ninja? The first time we go against other ninja you'll be dead in thirty seconds!*

Seeing the look of concern in Naruto's expression Sakura smiled back warmly.

Sasuke had not realized he'd activated his sharingan until Kakashi told him. Kakashi had promised to begin training him in its use as soon as they got back to Konoha. Sasuke wasn't sure what a non Uchiha could show him about it, but he would take whatever instruction he could get. When he had entered the shrine with Kakashi he'd been surprised to find the two corpses there and Sakura lying wounded. He'd assumed he'd be the first to score a kill on the team, but Naruto had beaten him to it. Sasuke had sent

Naruto one single respectful nod, surprised Naruto had shyly nodded back understanding.

It looked like Naruto really had grown up since the academy. He was obviously a much stronger ninja than poor Sakura. He was willing to admit that the dobe was deserving of some respect. But while he respected what Naruto had done he had no doubts about his own continued superiority. If not for Kakashi's order he could have had a dozen kills, and now that his sharingan was active he would only grow more and more powerful.

As Kakashi watched over Sakura Naruto quietly approached Shizuku. She eyed him with worry but did not turn away or try to leave.

"Do you not like me anymore?" Naruto asked directly, his voice low to keep his words just for her.

The eight year old girl looked up at him, his face and clothes were still bloody. The bodies were still lying on the floor. The shrine had been desecrated, whoever became the next priestess would have to spend weeks performing purification rituals.

"I... I still like you niisan," she said just as quietly. "And for saving me and Sakura I thank you. But... but.... you..." her voice began to shake.

"I killed," he said. "I did what I had to. You heard Kakashi-sensei, it was what any ninja would do, I'm even getting a commendation for it. There was nothing wrong in what I did."

"But you killed! Those men are dead now. Don't you feel any sorrow? Any regret?"

"No, they'd have killed you and Sakura without a second thought. When it's us or them I chose them."

"How can you be so cruel?" She asked sadly.

"It's cruel world out there," he told her. "Maybe you didn't notice because you've been stuck in a shrine all this time. The men who came here all wanted to kill you. I did what I had to; my team did what we had to. Would it have been better if we hadn't?"

She looked down. "Maybe," she said so very softly. "It hurts me to think I am the cause of all this."

"Don't say that Shizuku-chan! None of this is your fault! The only people to blame are the people who want to kill you. Don't start blaming yourself for something that isn't your fault."

She looked up at him. "Why do you care so much Naruto?"

"Because you're a friend!" He nearly wailed. "Except for one other person you are the only one to be really kind to me. You've become a precious person to me and I would do *anything* to protect you!"

And a slight smile appeared. "Thank you niisan, that means a lot to me."

"Sorry to interrupt," Kakashi said and joined them. "There is something we need to discuss." He was looking at Shizuku.

"What is it Kakashi-san?"

"I think it would be best if we were to all leave here now, you can return with us to Konoha."

"Leave?" Shizuku said startled. "But I am the Priestess of the Spring; I have a duty to perform. Besides this is my home."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but the only duty you have here is to be sacrificed. There is something you need to know..."

Flashback

Jibo was coughing up water. "Ple... please no more, I'll tell you whatever you want."

Kakashi nodded. "All right, first thing, how many people are in your organization?"

"About half the village," Jibo said.

"If you'd like to go for another swim..." Kakashi let the rope slip and bit and Jibo jerked towards the water.

"It's the truth I swear!" Jibo cried. "I started with a few people, no one really knows who. But over time more and more people joined. About half the village knows including the whole police force. We do what is necessary for the village to thrive. If we don't come back tomorrow you'll be facing a lot more men who'll be ready to do whatever they have to."

Kakashi got an uneasy feeling, he believed him. "If that's really true then why did Binya send for us?"

"The mayor is part of the half that doesn't know. The people who aren't part of it have no idea who is or how many we are. Binya didn't know who he could trust so he just acted on his own as mayor, using village funds to hire all of you."

"So what you're saying is that roughly about thirty thousand people are a part of this conspiracy?"

Jibo nodded. "And all of us are committed to doing whatever it takes."

"So you can see our problem," Kakashi said. "I decided to stay here to see what sort of response we would get when the original five men didn't return. Given what we faced I'd say we really are up against a massive number of people. Ninja can do a lot, but even

with me here the four of us cannot face thousands. The only way we can ensure your safety is to take you away from here."

"I am sorry Kakashi-san, but I cannot do that. Whatever the danger I have a sacred duty to perform, I cannot abandon it, I will not abandon it."

"You do understand that if you stay here I cannot guarantee your safety?"

"If you and your team wish to leave Kakashi-san I will not blame you. But I cannot go."

"If you're staying then we're staying too! Right sensei?" Naruto said.

Though he looked pained Kakashi nodded. "I will do everything in my power to protect you and carry out my mission, that is the way of the village hidden within the leaf." *If we make it out of here I am definitely getting some hazard pay for this!*

For the good of the village

"Well, if you're determined to stay there are some things we'll need to take care of. Sakura you just relax, Naruto and Sasuke come with me."

"What are we doing?" Sasuke asked.

"We're going outside and break some knee caps," Kakashi said.

Everyone in the room looked at him.

"Are you serious?" Sasuke asked.

"Counting the men from last night we have a hundred and three prisoners," Kakashi said. "There's no way for us to handle so many. Under normal circumstances we would just hand them over to the local authorities, but that obviously won't work here."

"Why don't we just kill them?" Naruto asked.

Shizuku gasped. "Naruto!"

Sakura and Sasuke both looked at him in surprise.

Kakashi was looking over at him too, but not in surprise. What worried Kakashi most wasn't that Naruto had suggested it, but rather the way he had suggested it. Not with passionate anger in his voice, but with an ordinary tone. He was just offering an answer to a problem, nothing more.

"There are times when we do that Naruto," Kakashi said. He was speaking to all of them. "In certain situations you *will* have to kill prisoners, but that is only when circumstances force us to. As a general rule we don't massacre helpless men, even if they are enemies."

"Then what's the point in breaking knee caps?" Naruto asked.

"If we break one knee cap they will still be able to make it back to Hikedo even if they have to lean on one another or crawl all the way there. And who knows? Maybe the sight will be enough to convince the others to leave us alone." *Though I doubt it.*

"Kakashi-san! Please don't hurt these men further!" Shizuku cried.
"Just let them go!"

Kakashi shook his head. "If I did that they'd just come back and attack us again with their friends. If they're lame they won't be any further threat. What we're doing is a mercy; it's either this or what Naruto suggested."

The three ninja went outside and in short order there was a loud series of shouts and cries. Shizuku knelt down in a corner and prayed trying to ignore the sounds.

Sakura lay there also listening. *This is a part of what it means to be ninja, hurting people because it's a part of the mission.* She tossed off her blanket and got up.

"Sakura-chan where are you going?"

"My left arm works just fine," she said. "If this is something that needs to be done I'm going to help my team." Sakura didn't realize it, but this was a first for her. For the very first time she was about to act as a ninja *without* caring what Sasuke thought.

When they were done with their task Kakashi told all of them to leave their weapons and just go. Despite much pain and difficulty the men wasted no time in stumbling and shambling away as fast as they physically could.

The two dead men were buried in the nearby forest. Shizuku prayed for their souls and for Kami's forgiveness. In the shrine she insisted

on wiping the blood up alone, as priestess it was her duty to purify the shrine of the violence that had tainted it.

The rest of that day and night passed quietly.

Naruto kept a large number of his clones surrounding the nearby woods. They each took turns staying up for guard duty with Kakashi only getting four hours sleep. Sakura insisted that she take a turn as well and Kakashi agreed.

The sun rose on the third and final day of the festival.

That morning a single visitor approached the shrine. He was met on the way there by Kakashi.

"I can't say I'm surprised to see you here," Kakashi noted. "Let me guess, you're here to try and talk us into leaving?"

Binya cast his eyes down nervously. "I am so sorry about all this, I... I never knew how, how many..."

"I know," Kakashi said. "I believe that when you hired us it was in good faith, that you thought there was a small conspiracy involved."

Binya slowly nodded. "Turns out it wasn't so small."

"Yeah."

"I am very sorry, but you and your team should go." Binya told him. "You will be paid the full amount. As your client I am releasing you from our agreement."

"I'm afraid we can't go." Kakashi said. "We came here to protect that little girl until the end of the festival. We will stay until that duty is complete."

"But... but I'm the client and I'm telling you to go!"

"You're obviously being forced to; orders made while under duress don't count."

The mayor's jaw fell open. "Don't you understand what will happen if you don't go?"

"I've got a pretty good idea."

"Then... then why?"

Kakashi looked straight at the man with his single eye. "'To abandon your duty is not courageous, below the courageous there is nothing.' These were the words of the former Hokage and my beloved sensei. That is the way of the shinobi."

Binya had no answer for that. In the end he turned around and went back.

Shizuku was kneeling before the two fresh graves speaking prayers.

"Why are you praying for people who wanted to kill you?" Naruto asked.

"All life is sacred to me niisan, I would pray for anyone who had passed that they would find peace in the next world."

"I'd let them rot in hell, it's what they deserve."

"Don't say that!" Shizuku looked over to him. "Please don't say such terrible things!"

"Why not? It's the truth." Naruto said. "They wanted to kill you Shizuku, just to appease the earth spirits or kami or whatever. You didn't matter to them; they just wanted to murder you for their own selfish reasons. They don't deserve your prayers. You should hate them."

"No," she said. "I would never hate them. Even if they did want to kill me I have already forgiven them."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why would you forgive them?" In his mind he saw all those angry faces that had tormented him. He remembered the cruel words the beatings the threats. What he couldn't remember was a single person (not one!) ever asking him for forgiveness. No one was ever sorry for hurting him or making him feel like a freak.

"I forgive them because it's the right thing to do," she answered simply. "We're all human and we all need to be forgiven sometimes."

"No you're wrong," Naruto shook his head vehemently. "The people who hurt you don't *deserve* to be forgiven. They didn't make a mistake; they didn't come here yesterday by accident. They knew exactly what they were doing. People like that don't deserve any forgiveness."

"Naruto, do you say that because you are a ninja, or for another reason?"

"I say it because I've had people hurt me all of my life. And it was because of something that was never my fault."

"If people have hurt you *niisan* then you need to forgive them, as much for your sake as for theirs. Holding on to hate, keeping grudges, all that will do is blacken your heart."

"I'm a ninja not a priest Shizuku."

"You're *human* Naruto and you have a good heart. You care about me more than anyone else even though we've only just met. You wouldn't be able to do that if you weren't a good person. I don't want you to change because of hatred."

"Shizuku-chan, there are things you don't know about me... terrible things. I'm not as nice as you might think."

"I don't believe that niisan," she said with a gentle smile. "I think you have a kind heart, but please don't let it become tainted."

"What if it's already tainted?" He asked quietly.

"Then all you have to do is let go of your hates and the taint will disappear."

"You make it sound easy."

"It is easy niisan!" She said. "To forgive someone is the easiest thing there is!"

Maybe for you. He smiled and seemed to silently agree.

As the sun went down Kakashi gathered his team outside the shrine.

"It will happen tonight," he told them. "If they come we won't be holding back, fight to the extreme limit and show no mercy no matter who your opponent may be."

"Why the change?" Sasuke asked curiously.

"The odds are different," Kakashi said. "Facing a hundred we could afford to be more careful. If we really are up against thousands though we have no choice but to be ruthless if we want to survive."

"That's fine by me," Naruto said.

"Me too," Sasuke said, an eager smirk on his face.

"Me too," Sakura said. Her right shoulder was heavily bandaged and her right arm all but useless. But she was ready to fight and do her duty.

They all were.

"I'm very proud of all three of you," Kakashi told them. "No matter what happens tonight all of you have performed like true ninja." All three students stood just a little taller. "Now one more thing, if you hear me give the order to retreat, or if I should be killed, I want all of you to get out and make it back to the village as fast as you can."

"But..."

"No buts! If I go down or if I give you the order you run! That clear?"

Sasuke and Sakura nodded.

"What about Shizuku?" Naruto asked.

"Shizuku has made her choice, we should respect it."

"I won't leave her behind," Naruto declared. "I'll save her no matter what."

"Even if she doesn't want to be saved?"

"That's right! Even if she ends up getting mad at me I'll still save her."

The door to the shrine was opened a crack and Shizuku was listening.

It was nearly ten p.m.

"They're coming." Naruto said.

"How many?" Kakashi asked quietly.

"More than I can count," Naruto replied.

Kakashi nodded. It was what he'd expected. Without ninja of their own the only advantage their enemies really had was numbers.

Naruto had made two hundred kage bunshins and they were hidden in the trees all around. He, Sasuke, and Naruto would face them on the ground. Sakura was sitting up on the shrine roof with a huge pile of kunai given to her by Naruto's shadow clones. Given her condition she would give the best service there. He had already chosen several powerful area effect jutsus that would cut a swath through any mass. If they wanted the girl he would make them pay a very high price.

But... if there really were tens of thousands and they really were ready to do whatever it took he knew they couldn't stop them all. There were limits to what he could do with his chakra and what Naruto could do with shadow clones. Their best hope for success was that the crowd would break and run when they saw what they were up against. They were only civilians after all, few if any of them would be hardened to the sudden and brutal death they would see. If they really were willing to pay the price though stopping all of them would be like trying to stop the tide.

Jibo had exaggerated a bit. Only about one sixth of the people were a part of this. Which meant *only* ten thousand came out. They came silently all through the wood from every direction, surrounding them and cutting them off. Most of them were dressed up in yukatas or other fancy clothes. A few of them carried clubs and other weapons, but the majority seemed to be unarmed. There were men and women ranging from teenage years to grandparents. Their calm faces looked steady as they approached with a slow certain pace out of the forest and on towards the shrine.

They came to an abrupt halt about fifty yards away when a wave of kunai flew down at their feet, making a perfect circle around the shrine.

"That's far enough," Kakashi called out. "Anyone who takes one step further dies."

A slight murmur went through the crowd, but no one turned away. A single woman in a navy blue yukata spoke up, she had long black

hair and brown eyes. "I wish to speak to Shizuku, I am her mother."

"Momma?" The door to the shrine opened and Shizuku ran out.

"Momma!"

"Wait!" Naruto grabbed her arm to keep her from running out to her mother.

"Niisan! Let me go! I want to be with momma! Momma!"

"You can't! Don't you get it? She wants to kill you too!" Naruto glared at the woman. "Isn't that right? You've come here to kill your own daughter."

"Don't say that! Momma loves me! She would never do that!" Shizuku looked at her. "Isn't that right momma?"

Tears slowly ran down the woman's face and she turned away unable to bear looking at her only child. "I'm... I'm so sorry."

"Momma?"

"We drew lots," the woman said as she tried to choke back her tears. "All the mothers with daughters the right age. I... I never wanted this for you, I love you darling. Momma loves you with all her heart."

"You love her but you want to help everyone kill her?!" Naruto shouted. "What kind of fucked up love is that?!"

"You don't understand," the woman cried. "No one here wants this! But it's for the good of the village!" A couple people beside her put their arms around her and tried to comfort her.

Nearby a small man stepped forward, the crowd parted around him. "It is true, no one wants this." An old man with gray whiskers spoke. He wore a loose fitting monks robe and held a staff in one hand. "But sadly it is necessary."

"Daisuke-sama?" Shizuku called.

"Hello Shizuku," the man bowed his head to her. "Shizuku, do you understand what is about to happen here?"

"Excuse me," Kakashi called politely. "Who are you?"

"Me? I am just an old man."

"He is Daisuke-sama," Shizuku said. "He was born here but spent forty years traveling all over the world to gain knowledge. He came back seven years ago at a time of crisis for the village. All the villagers say he brought us good fortune, that kami showed us favor because he was a holy man."

"Seven years ago?" Kakashi asked suspiciously. "You mean right around the time the first priestess was killed?"

Daisuke nodded. "Yes, for you see, along with spiritual matters I studied many other things as well during my travels. Including how to forge contracts with beings from other realms."

"Like earth spirits?" Kakashi asked.

"Yes, exactly."

Naruto let go of Shizuku's arm and glared at the monk. "What the hell are you talking about? What has this got to do with anything?"

"There are all sorts of powerful beings who while not of the earth have contact with it. With some you can make bargains." Kakashi said. "For instance I have a contract with the dogs. We made a pact by which some of them will come and serve me in exchange for some of my blood."

The monk nodded. "Animal summons are only one of the many types of beings who exist. There are also spirits of the earth, air, and water with great powers over those elements. When I returned here from my journeys I found the village was dying. People were moving

away and giving up on the farms their families had worked for generations. I knew I had to do something to save the village, and so I made a contract with an earth spirit. If we offered up the blood on an innocent and pure child the lands of the village would be fertile and bountiful for the coming year. One innocent life in exchange for the prosperity and survival of your village. Is that such a bad bargain?"

"It is for her!" Naruto screamed. "She had nothing to do with this! She didn't get a choice! She only gets her one life, why should she have to sacrifice it for the rest of you?"

"I thought a ninja would understand," Daisuke said. "Wouldn't you give your life to protect your village?"

"It's not the same! I *chose* to become a ninja, the very *first* lesson they teach you at the academy is that a ninja must be ready to die at any time. I've always known what might happen to me and I'm fine with it because I chose this. But what choice did you give her? Huh? Her mother drew lots and so she has to die? Yeah, it's a great bargain for the rest of you. Why should she have to die for all of you when it's not even her choice?"

"She has a choice now though doesn't she?" Daisuke asked. He turned his focus to her. "You know what will happen now. The people here will try to fulfill the terms of the contract and the ninja will cut us down. I will die, your mother will die. Then more of us will come forward and be killed. How many hundreds, how many thousands will die? How much will the village suffer if we anger the earth spirit by breaking our contract? Is your life more precious? Will you allow all this bloodshed and suffering to happen for your sake?"

"No," she said. "No, I couldn't bear that." She reached into her pocket and took out the object that Naruto had given her. "I suppose this is my karma. Naruto..."

He turned from the monk to look at the girl standing a few steps behind him. He froze. She was holding his kunai to her own throat.

"Shizuku don't..."

"Please forgive them Naruto, and don't let this darken your heart." She gave him a sad smile. "I really wish you could have been my niisan." With both hands she slashed her throat making the blood splurt.

"NO!!" Naruto grabbed the kunai and threw it away, but it was too late. "No! Why?! They don't deserve this!"

He held her up with one arm and pressed a hand to her throat trying to stem the flow of blood. She was looking at him and seemed unafraid. She reached up and patted his hand and smiled. He could do nothing but watch as the light left her eyes.

"She was a very brave child," Daisuke said. "She will be missed."

Naruto gently laid her down on the grass. "Shut up."

Kakashi gasped as he felt a demonic presence and immense power fill the air. His students and all the people in the crowd felt it as well, a terrible evil hovering above them. They however had no idea what the source of it was.

Has the seal broken? Kakashi wondered. Naruto was surrounded by a red aura, demonic chakra so strong it was visible. He was close enough to see the transformation, his eyes were red, the scars on his cheeks had thickened, and his hands had become claws. **"I'm going to KILL you!"**

And matching actions to words he dashed across the fifty yards separating him from the monk in the blink of an eye. Daisuke saw a demon's face and tried to cry for mercy. Naruto's fist struck his chest and went through his heart and then out his back. The old man fell over dead without even the chance to cry out.

People screamed and the entire crowd panicked, terrified they were about to be killed next. Pushing and shoving they got away from

there as fast as they could. Naruto let them go; he was busy tearing apart the old monk's robes until he found what he was looking for. When he stood up he noticed Kakashi and the others all staring at him. He could smell fear coming off all three of them, the strongest from Kakashi.

*That figures I guess, he's the only one who knows what I am. " **Hey sensei, if you destroy a contract that destroys the bargain too right?"***

"Yes, it does."

With a thought the paper in his hands burst into flame. When that was done he turned his head into the breeze. The night air reeked with delicious of terror. " **I'm going to kill every last one of them!"**

"Naruto," Kakashi said warily. "I need you to calm down now, it's over."

" It's not over until they're all dead!"

"Is that what she would have wanted?" Kakashi asked. Given the power levels he was sensing right now Kakashi wasn't at all sure he could stop Naruto. But if he was serious about massacring the villagers he would have to try.

Naruto looked over to where she was lying on the ground. To Kakashi's immense relief he could feel the power and demonic presence fade away. As he watched Naruto's transformation reversed and he became himself again.

"No," Naurto said. "She would want me to forgive them and let them all live. Well... I'll let them live." *I couldn't keep my promise. I am so sorry Shizuku-chan.*

Something in Naruto died that night, from that time on he would never again open his heart.

The shy princess

Naruto was standing alone over a freshly dug grave. When it had all ended he'd taken her deep into the woods and buried her beneath an oak tree. He doubted the villagers would ever find her grave. He wouldn't give them the chance to play hypocrites one last time. He wouldn't have them give her a funeral procession filled with false tears and pretend grief. What they had done had been the worst sort of betrayal. None of them had cared about her! Not even her own mother! All that had mattered to them was how her death would benefit them.

You were wrong Shizuku-chan, it wasn't karma, it was just the selfish desires of your own people. Naruto thought bitterly. You should never have sacrificed yourself for them, they weren't worth it!

There was a stir in the air. He took a deep breath and picked up a familiar scent. "Hey Sasuke."

The boy leapt down to his side. "Didn't realize you'd spotted me. The sun's up Naruto, you've been here all night. We need to have breakfast and then we're leaving."

Naruto looked up at the clear blue sky. "Yeah... yeah, I guess it's time for me to go." He cast his eyes back down at the freshly turned earth. He'd placed a few flowers. "Goodbye Shizuku-chan, I'm sorry." That was all the memorial service the young priestess would ever have. "Come on let's go."

Naruto leapt away with Sasuke at his side.

Flashback

With his demonic power gone Naruto walked over to Shizuku's body, ignoring the questioning looks from his teammates and sensei.

Gently, oh so gently, he closed her eyes and picked her up bridal style in his arms. He looked over at Kakashi.

"I'm going to bury her." It was not a request.

"We'll be leaving early tomorrow, just keep that in mind." After what he'd just seen he knew he had to handle Naruto very carefully.

"Right," he acknowledged and leapt away.

As soon as he was gone Sasuke spoke. "What the hell just happened? How did Naruto get that kind of power?"

"It wasn't just power," Sakura said worriedly. "It felt... evil, like Naruto-kun was turning into some kind of monster." She'd come to really care for him and wanted him to be all right.

You have no idea how close to the truth you are Sakura. Kakashi thought. "All right, first off everything that happened on this mission is off the books. Once I report to the Hokage I don't doubt he'll declare all of this an S-rank secret. That means once we return to the village you are not to share *anything* about this with anyone. The punishment for revealing sealed information is death. Am I clear?"

He waited for them both to nod.

"Now as for the power Naruto displayed I am afraid I can't go into that," he saw Sasuke open his mouth and wagged a finger at him. "The matter is *also* an S-rank secret, so I really can't discuss it."

"But sensei we're Naruto-s teammates," Sakura argued. "If it affects him it affects us too! Don't we have a right to know?"

"The short answer to that would be, 'no' Sakura. Some secrets have to be kept even between teammates. If Naruto wants to tell you some day that's fine, but please don't try and pursue this matter. Just accept that Naruto is not like other ninja. Try and think of his ability as a special ace in the hole, something no other team has." That

was certainly true, and also the most positive spin he could put on it. *I will definitely need to have a long talk with the Hokage about this.* "In any case let's get the monk buried and set up a watch schedule, I have a feeling Naruto won't be coming back before morning."

Heading back to the shrine Naruto was caught off guard when Sasuke spoke.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Naruto looked over at him in surprise. "Thanks."

"Can... can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"When you killed the monk, you avenged her. How did it make you feel?" Sasuke asked him.

"What are you talking about?"

"When you got your revenge, did you feel satisfied?"

Naruto thought about it as they continued to leap through the trees. "Right when I killed him, yeah, I was happy about it. I would have been even more happy if I could have killed all the rest too. But later... after I buried her all I felt was sorrow that she was gone." He let out a sigh. "Even if I'd waded in blood I don't think it would have made the hurt any less."

"Does that mean you regret killing him?"

"Hell no!" Naruto shouted. "It may not be much but it's still something! If I'm going to miss her no matter what I may as well get that little bit of satisfaction!"

"Is that all it is?" Sasuke asked. "A little bit of satisfaction?"

Naruto looked over at him and flashed him a winning smile. "It's better than nothing right?"

"I guess," Sasuke answered but appeared troubled.

By the time the two of them returned for breakfast Naruto had his mask screwed on firmly in place. When Sakura showed him her concern he thanked her for it and assured her he was all right. Everyone avoided the topic of what he had done last night and he certainly didn't bring it up.

As they ate a young boy arrived with an envelope containing a message from the mayor along with their mission payment.

"Binya thanks us for our efforts and has included a generous bonus as well as words of praise for the Hokage to read," Kakashi said in a dull voice. "He also says he hopes all matters have now been settled. How nice of him."

"Gutless coward," Naruto muttered. When he saw Sakura look over worried he plastered on a smile. "Just kidding."

"Well, we're done here," Kakashi said and put the message away. "Finish up breakfast and we'll head back home."

Mercifully the trip back to the village was uneventful.

"You three can have the next two days off, you've earned it." Kakashi told them. "Sakura, get to the hospital and have your wound properly looked at by a medic nin. I'll report into the Tower." He had already given each of them their share of the mission fee.

"Hey Naruto," Sakura said. "You want to get some ramen with me?" She waved her share of the money around in her left hand, her entire right arm was still sore. "My treat!"

"Don't you need to go to the hospital Sakura-chan?" Naruto asked.

"There's no rush, I can do it after we eat."

"Okay, I never turn down free food."

She looked over a bit nervously at Sasuke. He's actually been rather nice to her since she'd gotten hurt. "Ah, I don't suppose you'd want to join us Sasuke-kun?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Sure," he answered.

"Re... really?" Sakura said.

Sasuke gave a slight nod. "You two are my teammates after all; you're both important to me."

"Awwww, did you hear that Sakura-chan? Sasuke-kun's human after all." Before Sasuke realized what the blond was up to he'd put an arm around his shoulders and was disturbingly close. "You loooove us don't you Sasuke-kun?"

"Don't touch me." *Maybe being all alone isn't so bad after all.* Sasuke thought.

Walking through the streets it was not long before Naruto saw all the ugly glares again. *Huh, welcome home, nice to know some things never change.* He was surprised at how much harder they were to ignore. After a week of being treated like a human being he now found it hard to accept being everyone's scapegoat again.

For a second he imagined how the village would react if they heard he'd given his life for them. In his mind's eye he saw civilians and ninja alike suddenly burst into cheering with spontaneous shouts of joy and fireworks overhead. *Fuck that!* He thought murderously. *Like I'd ever lay down my life for such an ungrateful bunch! They all just*

*want to use me, well just wait and see. One day I'll use all of you!
And I'll treat you every bit as sweetly as you've all treated me!*

Walking along he picked out a familiar scent. Sure enough he spotted the person crossing the street up ahead. Seeing her a wicked thought occurred to him. He could have a little bit of fun and maybe set something up for the future. Walking faster he left his teammates and momentarily disappeared into the crowd of passersby.

"Hey Naruto wait up!" Sakura called after him.

"What's that dobe up to now?"

Hinata was walking along with her teammates towards training ground 17 where Kurenai would meet them. She was usual she was dressed in dark pants and a dark shirt hidden beneath a bulky beige jacket. Kiba was talking to Akamaru about how hard they would train today and about what an awesome team they would be. The little white dog riding on top of his head barked his approval. Shino was walking along in his usual disinterested silence. She walked between the two of them and a couple steps behind. As always she worried that her weakness was holding her teammates back and was disappointing her sensei. Those were her thoughts when she felt a light tap on her shoulder. Instinctively she turned... and found a smiling blond face planted just a couple inches from her own.

"Hey there!" Naruto said.

"Naruto-kun!" She blurted out and jumped back. Having him get so close out of the blue her face was turning beet red and her heart was racing.

Seeing her reaction he frowned and put on some big sad puppy dog eyes. "Awww, what's the matter Hinata-chan? Not happy to see me?"

Did he just call me Hinata-chan? She thought with wonder. Despite having had a crush on him for the entire academy they had only ever spoken to each other maybe a dozen times. She had always lacked the courage to approach him and he had never been interested in talking to any girl but Sakura. Having him so close it was taking all of her effort just not to faint.

Standing there he was bombarded by scents of panic, anxiety, hope, and attraction all coming off of her. He could of course see how red her face was and the way she was pressing her index fingers together. It was just too obvious that the girl had strong feelings but didn't know how to express them. *Was she always like this? How could I not have noticed? Was I really that blind back then?* Despite her timid appearance Hinata was the heir of the Hyuuga clan, one of the most influential and wealthy in Konoha. She was the closest thing the village had to a princess. In the same way the villagers all despised him for something he had no power over; they all honored and respected her simply because of her birth. What could possibly be sweeter than forcing all the villagers to see their Hyuuga princess chase after him like a pathetic fangirl? *This'll be even more fun than painting the Hokage monument!*

With a simple expertise he rubbed the back of his head while offering her a humble façade. "I guess a cute girl like you wouldn't want to talk to a guy like me, huh?"

Cute!! Did Naruto-kun just call me cute?! Wait I haven't said anything to him! I'm just standing here like a mute. Ack! I need to say something before he thinks I don't like him! "You... you think I'm cute?"

"Sure! I'm sorry I never said anything before, but I guess I only had eyes for Sakura up until now. But now I think Hinata-chan is definitely the number one cute girl!"

She just couldn't believe Naruto was saying that, she'd longed for him to give her any sort of notice. To hear him say such sweet things about her...

"Hey!" Naruto shouted as she pitched over unconscious. Fortunately both Kiba and Shino were there to catch her. It was as if they had expected this to happen.

"Nice going Romeo," Kiba said with a mocking grin.

"Naruto, please exercise greater care when speaking to our teammate," Shino said in a dull monotone.

"Naruto what did you do?" Sakura demanded as she and Sasuke joined the scene.

"Nothing I swear! All I did was talk to her!"

"What did you say?" Sakura asked.

"Nothing much I just told her she was really cute."

Kiba snorted. "Yeah, and then she went out like a light."

"It was to be expected," Shino said.

Sakura looked excited and very pleased. Even Sasuke looked a little amused.

"I'm so happy for you Naruto-kun," Sakura said.

"Took you long enough dobe," Sasuke said.

Naruto looked at all their faces. "Wait a second; was it really *that* obvious she liked me?"

All four of them burst into such loud laughter that people passing by stopped to stare.

"I see," Sarutobi replied gravely. Kakashi had just finished giving him an oral summary of the mission. "The details of the mission will have to be made an S-rank secret. That Naruto can already access the

Kyuubi's power is disturbing, though I suppose it was inevitable at some point." The Hokage looked closely at Kakashi. "Do you wish to keep him on active duty?"

Kakashi nodded, he'd had two full days to think about it. "I do Hokage-sama, given what he saw I don't really blame him for his actions. And when I spoke to him he acknowledged me and kept enough discipline to stop before things got out of hand. I do not consider him a danger to himself or to his comrades... at least not at this time."

"Have you inspected the seal?"

"Yes Hokage-sama, on the first night after leaving. So far as I can tell the seal is intact. Though of course I am no seal master."

"I will have to summon an expert to examine him," Sarutobi said. "In the meantime I want you to help Naruto with his chakra control and instruct him in whatever jutsus you think fitting. Given what he has endured I think it would be wise to keep him busy and help him gain better self control for the future."

"Actually Sasuke has just activated his sharingan, I'll need to spend time helping him master the use of it."

"Then I expect you will be very busy instructing *all* your students Kakashi. I have faith you will not let me down." Sarutobi spoke without an ounce of sympathy.

"Heh, of course Hokage-sama." *Looks like I'm going to be bust for awhile, I may even have to cut back on my reading.*

"Good, the Chunin exams are coming up soon. Cut back on the number of missions and concentrate on pure training instead."

"I never said I was going to recommend them for the exams."

The Hokage looked at him in surprise. "So you don't plan to put your team forward?"

"Oh no I do," Kakashi said pleasantly. "I just hadn't said so yet."

Preparations

Kakashi was happy.

In the four weeks since returning from their tragic mission he'd been kept extremely busy. Team seven had only performed a handful of minor D-ranks in that time. The time had instead been spent giving his kids a crash course in useful ninja abilities to ready them for the Chunin exams.

Flashback

"Here you are," Kakashi said with a grin as he handed out forms to his students.

"What are these?" Sasuke asked.

"They're entry forms for the Chunin exams that will be starting in a week's time." Kakashi told them. "Despite my better judgment I've decided to nominate the three of you."

Naruto looked at the entry form eagerly. "Sensei I take back most of the bad things I've said about you." *Great! I can impress the old man and take a step toward becoming Hokage!*

"Me too," Sakura said.

"My opinion hasn't changed," Sasuke said. But he also looked very interested as he read over the form.

"Gee thanks," Kakashi said. "Participation in the exams is strictly voluntary. If you choose not to take part it will not be held against you in any way."

"Huh? Did you say something?" Naruto looked up. He had a pen in hand and was already filling out his form. Sakura and Sasuke were

doing the same.

"Don't you want to take a little time to think it over before you decide?" Kakashi asked. "It's very rare for rookie squads to be invited to attend, though I expect multiple squads will this year. These exams will include elite ninja from all over the elemental lands. The competition will be fierce and the danger considerable. The competition can be cut throat, literally."

"That's exactly what I want!" Naruto said. "I want to face serious opposition so I can prove to everyone how strong I am, especially to the old man!"

"I agree," Sasuke said. "The only way to really find out if you're strong is by going up against the best. I want to see how I measure up."

Sasuke and Naruto looked at one another and nodded. They understood each other perfectly.

"I know I'm not as strong as my teammates," Sakura admitted. "But I want to get stronger so I can stand at their side when they need me. If this will help me get stronger then I'm joining too!"

Kakashi smiled at them from beneath his mask. "Well, I'm very glad to hear that. It sounds like each of you wants to participate for the right reasons. Hold on to those forms and deliver them to room 301 of the academy in a month's time. The other teams from Konoha who will participate haven't been nominated yet, so don't tell anyone that you have. For the next month we won't be doing many missions. I will instead concentrate on preparing you for the exams."

"You mean you're actually going to train us?" Sasuke asked suspiciously.

"I bet the old man is making him do it," Naruto said with a laugh.

"Probably," Sasuke agreed.

Kakashi sweat dropped. *I'm losing a lot of face again.*

Though it had been tiring he had done his best for them. They had all been taught the tree and water walking techniques as well as how to dispel a genjutsu. With Sasuke Kakashi concentrated on giving him advice on using his sharingan. Sasuke had managed to gain two tomoe immediately upon activation. That meant Sasuke was capable of predicting and copying enemy moves and jutsus whenever the sharingan was active. And unlike Kakashi because Sasuke was an Uchiha he could activate his sharingan and use it for long periods without depleting his chakra.

Because Sasuke could learn jutsus almost instantly now Kakashi showed him several fire based jutsus that he thought would be especially useful. He was careful not to show him any that would drain away too much chakra in a single use. That would wait until he had more experience and had built up his reserves further. (Which meant no chidori or kage bunshin.)

Naruto had vast reserves of chakra but needed time to learn new jutsus. He'd gone ahead and used chakra paper to discover he was a wind type and that Sasuke was a fire type (no surprise there) and Sakura was a water type. He'd shown Naruto two wind based jutsus, one offensive and one defensive. He'd helped him improve his taijutsu and then had him spar with clones to get the new moves down. He'd also show him the leaf exercise to help him improve his chakra control.

Sakura had by far the smallest chakra reserves and the best chakra control of any of his students. She'd gotten the tree walking exercise down on the first try and water walking down after just three. While very intelligent she was not physically powerful or blessed with any single outstanding talent. Given her mix of strengths and weaknesses Kakashi had decided that she would be best suited to using genjutsu to fight opponents at long range. Kakashi was no genjutsu specialist but had picked some up among the over thousand jutsu he knew. He taught her the basic principle and gave

her two low level genjutsus. When there was more time he would talk to Kurenai and see if he could get some help.

Kakashi was happy. Not only because his students were shaping up so well, but because they were actually becoming a real team. Along with learning individual skills he'd watched as each member had offered help to the others. Sakura had given suggestions about tree and water walking. Naruto had offered to spar with the others using clones to help them with their taijutsu. Sasuke had offered advice on learning jutsus.

When he had first gotten them he had wondered if it was even possible to weld them together into an effective unit. But after their tragic mission all of them had returned with a better idea of what it meant to be ninja, and with an appreciation for each other. Despite his continued concern for Naruto and Sasuke he was starting to think that maybe, just maybe the three of them might become something very special.

"All right team, that's enough for today," Kakashi called.

"Wah? You're ending the session now?" Naruto asked. They would normally go until it started to get dark. From the position of the sun it wasn't even noon yet.

"The exams begin tomorrow at four p.m.," Kakashi told them. "Take the rest of the day and relax, the exams will be grueling no matter how they are set up. I'll meet you there tomorrow."

With that Kakashi disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Naruto looked over at his two teammates. "You guys want to get something to eat?"

"Sure!" Sakura said.

"Fine," Sasuke said.

At the end of most practices they had gotten into the habit of eating together. Ichiraku's was becoming a second home to them.

"The village is full of foreign ninja," Ayame said. "It's very exciting!"

"None of them ever eat here though," Teuchi complained from the kitchen.

"When the finals are held there will be a lot of visitors in town," Ayame said cheerfully. "I'm sure business will pick up then." She looked at the three of them. "Are all of you excited about tomorrow?"

"You bet!" Naruto said. "Tomorrow we'll amaze everyone with our awesome abilities!"

"It won't be that easy dobe," Sasuke told him with a slight smirk. "We're going up against the best of the best. It'll be hard."

"I don't care how hard it is!" Naruto declared. "I will definitely be number one at the end. But I'll let you be number two."

"Well that's nice of you dobe."

"Think nothing of it teme," Naruto said with an exaggerated nod of his head, like the Fire Daimyo granting some small favor.

Sasuke looked slightly annoyed while Sakura burst out laughing. Not so long ago hearing Naruto say something like that to Sasuke-kun would have royally pissed her off. Now it only made her laugh. She'd come to appreciate Naruto's abilities and see him as a real friend, someone who mattered to her. And while she cared a great deal about Sasuke and still wanted to be his girl she was no longer under the delusion that he was perfect in every way.

"Aren't you a little worried though?" Ayame asked.

"Are you kidding?" Naruto said with a wide grin. "They're the ones who should be scared, scared of the real me!"

"The real you?" Ayame asked questioningly.

Aw crap! I said too much! "Heh, yeah, I mean the awesome ninja I really am. Not the idiot everyone thinks I am."

Ayame accepted that but both Sasuke and Sakura looked a little worried.

The conversation went in another direction and eventually the meal ended with the three of them going their own ways.

Idiot! Naruto berated himself. *The real me? What the hell was I thinking saying something like that?!* Heading back to his cramped apartment he saw the ugly glares from most of the people on the street. *Then again why do I bother since everyone knows anyway?*

For the first time he wondered if Ayame and Teuchi knew the truth about him. They were both good people and among the tiny minority that actually treated him like a human being. Unlike most of the restaurants and places to eat in Konoha he had always been welcomed there and made to feel like a valued customer. He could remember the stand opening when he was six and first meeting them then. Had they just moved to the village? He wasn't sure, but probably. If they came here six years ago they wouldn't know about him.

If they did would they hate me like everyone else? He wondered. After a short debate he came up with the likely answer. *Yeah, they probably would.* The thought made him a little sad, people were so damn disappointing.

Walking along he picked up a familiar scent drifting in from behind him. A smile lit his face as his inner prankster came to life. *Heh, this should be fun.* He took a corner that actually led away from his

apartment. The second he did so he dashed up the side of the building and vanished onto the roof.

Where did he go? Hinata thought sadly. Even though it wasn't really proper behavior she had been following Naruto-kun since accidentally spotting him. Ever since that day he had called her cute she had been dying to talk to him.

But as luck would have it that very day sensei had announced they would be leaving the village for their very first C-rank mission. She'd been out of the village for a week before returning. She'd hoped to run into him again but apparently his team had begun some very heavy training regimen, he was never around. Between his training schedule and her own training and missions she hadn't spotted him until today.

She wanted to go up to him and say hello. That wouldn't be strange would it? He'd said she was cute so that meant it was alright for her to go up and just say hello. He wouldn't think she was weird... would he? *I'm such an idiot! I fainted in front of him! He probably does think I'm weird!* And what would he think if he caught her stalking him like this? She put her head down in shame. She knew what her father would say, that she was disgracing her clan with such behavior. That she shouldn't behave in such a manner. The thought of her father's disapproval filled her with dread.

But she kept looking for him anyway.

When it came to him she somehow found the courage not to care what anyone else thought. (Though not quite enough to actually talk to him.) Peering down the street he had just taken she couldn't see any sign of him. *Where could he be?*

"Hey Hinata-chan, are you looking for someone?" A cheerful voice said from behind.

"Eek!" She jumped and twirled around to see Naruto standing right there grinning at her. *He caught me following him!* Her mind wailed.

This time when she passed out in front of him he was ready and caught her. Taking her in both arms he looked at her peaceful face. *What sort of ninja faints?* He chuckled as he leapt up to the roof tops with Hinata still in his arms. *I got to admit though, she really is cute!*

As Hinata slowly opened her eyes she saw a face come into focus.

"You all right Hinata-chan?"

"Naruto-kun!"

"That's me," he said.

Hinata quickly looked about and realized she was on a roof alone with Naruto. "Wh... where are we?"

"I brought you to a house near the Hyuuga mansion. I guessed that's where you were headed, right?"

"Ri... right!" She eagerly nodded her head. *Thank kami he must not realize I was following him!* "Tha... thank you fo... for bringing me here Naruto-kun."

"No problem Hinata-chan," he answered with that smile she had always loved. "You know I was kind of hoping to talk to you, but me and my team have sort of been busy."

"Oh! Tha... that's all ri... right, I've been bu... busy too. Wha... what did you want to talk about?"

He looked uncomfortable all of a sudden and began to fidget a bit and cast his eyes down. "Well, ah, this is sort of hard, but I wanted to ask you something."

"Wha... what is it Naruto-kun? You can ask me anything." She began to press her fingers together nervously. *Is he going to ask me to...*

Naruto looked directly at her with those blue eyes of his and gently took both of her hands into his. "I know you're probably going to say no, but would you go on a date with me Hinata-chan?"

He did! He asked me out! She felt herself start to hyperventilate. *Quick! Answer him before he changes his mind!* "Yes!" She got out and somehow remained conscious. "Naruto-kun I would love to go on a date with you!"

"Really Hinata-chan?" He asked in a shy voice.

She nodded her head almost violently.

"Great! Then let's go out as soon as the exams are over, okay?"

"It's... it's a date," she said and felt happier than she could ever remember feeling.

Behind his happy smile Naruto was laughing.

Begin the Chunin exams

"What do you think was going on with that whole scene up on the second floor?" Naruto asked.

"Some sort of genjutsu obviously," Sakura said with a touch of pride. "It wasn't hard to spot." Since Kakashi thought she could best help her team as a genjutsu specialist she had spent a lot of her free time reading up on the subject. She now knew the tell tale signs of how to spot one.

"It's probably some sort of preliminary to the test itself," Sasuke said. "Trying to weed out the really weak teams."

"Pffft, if you can't even figure out what floor you're on that's pretty damn weak. Like that weird looking kid in then green leotard, he was on his knees *begging*." Naruto's mouth twisted in disgust. He'd done that as a child, begged people for mercy, it never helped. People just saw it as a sign of weakness and were even more cruel. *I'll never beg anyone for anything ever again.*

"I'm sure he'll be one of the ones weeded out," Sasuke agreed. "The ones we'll be up against will be the real competition."

"Bring it on! I can't wait!" Naruto said.

Sasuke nodded in total agreement and glanced at his two teammates. Physically they looked like they had back in the academy days. Naruto with that bright orange jumpsuit and goofy smile. Sakura with her red dress and long pink hair. Back then he'd thought nothing of either of them. When they'd been assigned to the same team his only worry had been that they would slow him down. The only thing that was on his mind was gaining power as fast as he could.

Hikido had changed things. There he had seen Naruto's power and his determination to protect someone no matter the risk. He had seen Sakura's courage, though wounded she had not spoken a word of complaint and had not asked for help. She had stood up and done her duty like a real ninja.

He remembered being surrounded by that endless sea of civilian faces and not being afraid. He would never admit it, but the reason he'd been unafraid was because he'd known that Kakashi, Naruto, and Sakura were there beside him and would never abandon him.

He wasn't alone anymore.

Outside room 301 Kakashi was waiting.

"Have you come to wish us luck sensei?" Naruto asked.

"That and to remind all of you that it really is very rare for rookie squads to be nominated. If you don't make it don't feel bad and just look on it as valuable experience for the future."

"What are you talking about sensei?" Naruto asked. "There's no way we'll fail!"

"That's right," Sasuke said.

Sakura crossed her arms and frowned. "Don't you believe in us sensei?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't have nominated you." He stood aside and waved them to the door. "Do your best!"

"Right!" Naruto said and led his teammates into room 301.

Kakashi grinned as they stormed in. *Good luck kids, I really do believe in you.*

Having been students here they knew 301 was a large lecture hall. Even so they were caught by surprise at how full it was. Ninja in all sorts of different outfits and with various hitai-ites all looked their way as they entered. Most of them did *not* look friendly.

"Nice crowd," Naruto mumbled.

"Hn."

"Na... Naruto-kun?"

Naruto looked over to see Hinata there with her team. She was looking at him with a light blush already on her face and pressing her index fingers together.

"Hinata-chan? Your team is in the exams too? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I'm so... sorry I gu... guess I forgot." Having Naruto paying attention to her at once made her both happy and nervous.

Sakura grinned. Now that Naruto had become a good friend to her she wanted him to be happy. She was sure that since Hinata was such a nice girl and really liked him that they would be good together.

Kiba looked at the scene and smirked. "So you don't get any ideas Naruto your girlfriend is on our team not yours. So don't expect her to help you out."

Naruto shot him a confident look. "That's fine I don't need any help, but if you guys need some help feel free to ask."

Everyone there, even Shino, raised a questioning eyebrow at what Naruto had *not* said.

Naruto-kun didn't say I wasn't his girlfriend. Does that mean he think of me like that? The thought turned her face completely red.

Naruto noticed it, and he knew the reason for it too. He'd picked his words with care and knew exactly what he'd said. Seeing her turn red gave him the perfect excuse to tease the girl just a bit more. It was kind of fun playing these little games with her. Sasuke had never known what he'd missed by just ignoring his fangirls.

Leaning forward he placed a hand on her forehead. "Are you feeling all right Hinata-chan?" He said in a caring tone. "You look kind of flushed."

Naruto-kun is touching me! He's worried about me!

"Aw come on!" Kiba growled as he caught his teammate just before she hit the ground. He sent an angry look at Naruto. "Could you please *not* do that for the rest of the exams?"

"Sorry," he said innocently. "I guess I don't know my own strength."

"There you are cutie! I've missed you!" A girl cried.

Taken by surprise Sasuke found Ino clutched to his back.

"Where have you been Sasuke-kun?" Ino asked.

"Ino let go of me," he said in a frosty tone.

"Heh, of course Sasuke-kun." She gave him a last squeeze and slid off his back. Spotting Sakura she yanked down her bottom eyelid and stuck her tongue out. "I'm going to make Sasuke-kun mine!"

Sakura looked over at her best friend. But rather than the loud argument Ino expected she just got an annoyed question. "Can't you take this a little more seriously?"

"What do you mean?" Ino retorted. "When it comes to Sasuke-kun I'm always serious."

"I was talking about the Chunin exams you should be serious about that!" Sakura snapped. "Could you at least pretend to be a ninja for

awhile?"

"What did you say forehead girl?!"

"Yara, yara, are you being troublesome again Ino?" A lazy boy approached with a fat one munching on some chips.

"Shut up you lazy jerk!" Ino shouted.

"What? They let you guys in too?" Naruto asked. "Man Kakashi-sensei said it was hard for rookie squads to get in here."

"I guess he was lying," Sasuke said.

"Yeah," Naruto agreed.

"Hey! You kids need to settle down! This isn't recess you know!" A silver haired boy with glasses and a leaf hitai-ite approached them.

The three rookies all turned to face him. The instant Naruto caught his scent he stiffened; there was something about it that reeked of danger. "Who the hell are you?" Naruto asked sharply.

Surprised by the sudden hostility the teen raised his hands and smiled at them. "Hey now no need for the harsh looks. My name is Kabuto and I'm just looking out for my fellow leaf ninja."

"Thanks we don't need your help."

"Now, now, no need to be like that. I can tell you're all rookies here. I just wanted to tell you to be a little more discrete, it's not a good idea to draw a whole lot of attention to yourselves. People are always tense when the exams start, you don't want to heighten the atmosphere with a public shouting match."

"Have you been here before Kabuto-san?" Sakura asked.

"This is my seventh time," he said.

"Then you can tell us what to expect?" Sakura asked.

"Hell," Kabuto said pleasantly. "The form of the tests change from exam to exam, but what never changes is that you will have to face some brutal competition from people who will do *anything* to advance. And since you're all children you can expect to be targeted by other teams."

"Well aren't you a load of sunshine?" Naruto said.

Kabuto shrugged. "That's what you can expect; you're better off knowing the truth from the start. If my words scare you, you should go ahead and quit right now."

"Yeah right," Naruto said. "I'm going to win this competition no matter what it takes. Me Uzumaki Naruto!"

"And what makes a little kid like you think he can win out against such powerful ninja?"

"Because of what I am," Naruto said.

"Which is?"

"If you're from this village you should already know," Naruto lowered his voice so only Kabuto would hear.

Interesting, Kabuto thought. His mission was to scout Sasuke and learn all he could about him. But his teammate was turning out to be rather intriguing as well.

There was a large puff of smoke and a dozen new arrivals appeared.

"All right you worthless bastards," one of them yelled out. "I am Morino Ibiki, the examiner for the Chunin selection exam's first test. He paused and let everyone quiet down. "Thank you for waiting; we will now start the first test of the Chunin exam. Each of you come forward and draw a numbered lot. Sit in the seat corresponding to that number. Once you are all seated we will hand out the tests."

"Aw you have got to be kidding me! A written test?" Of all his nightmare scenarios this one had never even occurred to him. He had built up his body, learned jutsus in the real world and in his sleep, improved his taijutsu with endless sparring sessions with hundreds of clones. What he had not done was study and book learning since his escape from the academy.

As he sat down he noticed that by some quirk Hinata was sitting right next to him. The girl shyly nodded to him. "Lets do our be... best Naruto-kun."

"Yeah Hinata-chan," he said. He noticed the light blush coloring her cheeks and the way she focused her eyes on the desk in front of her. He thought the way she acted around him absolutely adorable. He'd never had any girl pay him any attention. Having a cute girl like Hinata crushing on him was kind of nice. He momentarily wondered about Sasuke's sexual preference. How could any normal guy *not* enjoy having a pretty girl chasing him?

"All right you maggots listen up!" Ibiki shouted. "I'm about to explain the rules to your test. Leave the test face down until I tell you to begin. Listen carefully as I won't repeat myself and I won't answer any questions."

He took a piece of chalk and began to write the rules down on the chalkboard as he explained them. "First rule; you guys will all start off with ten points. The test is made up of ten questions and each one is worth a point. For each wrong answer you lose a point. Second rule; this is a team test. Whether you pass or fail will be determined by the combined scores of your teammates. Third rule; anyone caught by my assistants cheating will have two points subtracted for each offense. And the final rule; those that lose all their initial points during the test will be failed along with their two teammates."

So if I get a zero I fail?! Naruto thought with mounting panic.

"The test will last one hour. I want you to show us what extraordinary ninja you can be. Begin!"

Through the room was the sound of papers being flipped over and pencils being pressed down.

Okay, I need to relax, I know I'm not book smart but Sakura and Sasuke both are. Since this is a team event if they both do well it should be enough to get us through. All I have to do is not get a zero. I just need to answer one question right. How hard could that be?

He looked at the first question. It involved cryptography. *Did we even cover this in the academy?* He looked at the second question. It involved angles and distances and possible wind velocities. He looked at the third question. It was filled with math problems that had more letters than numbers. Scanning down the exam he saw all nine problems equally impossible to decipher. The tenth question was left blank except for a note stating it would not be given until there were only fifteen minutes left.

Aw crap I'm completely screwed! All he could do was stare blankly at the sheet in front of him. He would have to hope and pray that he could somehow answer that last question.

In the meanwhile Hinata was flying through the test without any apparent difficulty. He considered looking over at her paper for a quick glimpse. He was dissuaded when one of the instructors sitting to the side loudly announced a student had cheated five times. Ibiki loudly told him and his two teammates to leave. Other teams soon followed.

If he was caught cheating just once he would lose two points. If he did managed to answer the tenth question it wouldn't do him any good as he'd have a grand total of negative one in that case. He decided he was better off risking everything on getting that question right.

But then about twenty minutes into the test Hinata covered her mouth and spoke in a very low whisper. "Naruto, you can copy if you want."

He had to fight to keep the look of hope off his face. Pretending to yawn he whispered back. "Thanks, just let me see for a few seconds."

Without an outward sign she lifted her left arm and slid her test towards him. He glanced at it, anything he saw even once he remembered. Just a couple seconds and he looked away covering his mouth again. "Okay, thanks."

She quickly covered up her test again and he began filling out the answers with a gleeful smile. It seemed that having a girlfriend could be useful in all sorts of ways.

The crowd thinned noticeably as team after team, was ejected for cheating.

"All right!" Ibiki spoke. "Fifteen minutes left, I will now give you the tenth question."

Naruto didn't care. He was willing to bet most of the answers Hinata had given him were correct. Whether he got this last question or not didn't matter.

"But before I get to that I'll need to mention two additional rules that will apply. First you will need to decide whether or not to take it."

"What?" Some blonde girl with a Suna Hitai-ite asked. "Why would we not take it?"

"Because of the last rule. Should you answer the question and get it wrong you and your teammates will never be allowed to take the exam again!"

Not surprisingly the entire room burst into loud shouts and angry demands.

"You can't do that!" Kiba shouted. "There are others here who have taken the exams before!"

"It's just your rotten luck you got me this time. As proctor my word is absolute! Anyone who answers wrong will be permanently barred from ever taking this exam again!" He paused to allow that time to sink in. he saw nervous looks pass between teammates. "On the other hand, anyone who rejects the tenth question will automatically fail along with his teammates. However you will remain eligible to take the exams again in six shirt months. So please consider carefully how much you are willing to risk on this one question, not only your future but the futures of your teammates as well."

Almost immediately someone stood up and announced he was rejecting the tenth question. He and his teammates were summarily failed and forced to walk out. Three more teams followed in quick succession.

Naruto leaned back and pretended to yawn covering up his mouth. "Will you help me again?"

Hinata covered her mouth and answered. "Yes."

With that Naruto sat there and waited, there was no way in hell he was going to give up.

Ibiki watched as team after team left. "Anyone else? Whether or not you spend the rest of your lives as Genin rides on this." He waited for a full minute but no one else raised a hand. "Very well then, all of you who are still in this room... have just passed the first test."

There was another loud ruckus followed by an explanation. Naruto tuned it out, the test was over and he had passed. That was all he needed to hear. Turning to Hinata he gave her a relieved smile. "Thanks Hinata-chan, you really saved me."

"Oh, it... it was nothing."

"No, you were putting not only yourself but your teammates at risk just to help me. That really means a lot to me. You took a huge chance, just for me."

Her heart beat was picking up and she could feel her face getting hot. "I... I would do an... anything for you Naruto-kun."

"Anything?" he asked with an amused note in his voice.

Her face got even darker. She couldn't find her voice but she nodded her head up and down.

Leaning forward in his seat he put his lips to her ear and whispered. "That's why I like you so much Hinata-chan."

She let out a tiny little, 'eek' and slumped unconscious into her seat.

I love doing that to her, Naruto thought as she carefully placed her hands in her lap.

The little scene did not go unnoticed. "Hey Naruto!" Kiba shouted. "What the hell did you say to her?"

Naruto smiled and wagged a finger at him. "It's a S-E-C-R-E-T."

"Look out!" Someone shouted.

A glass window shattered as a form burst into the room. A kunoichi in a trench coat, mini skirt and fishnet stood in front of a banner that read, 'Proctor of the Second Test.'

"All right idiots enough celebrating! I am the proctor for the second test of this exam! Mitarashi Anko! Now follow me!"

The applicants remained seated blankly staring back.

"You really do have the worst timing Anko," Ibiki told her.

"Hmph!" She did a quick head count of those in front of her. "Sixty?! Ibiki you left twenty teams? You went way too easy on them!"

"What can I say? We had some exceptional candidates this time."

"Ha! I'll cut their numbers down by at least half! All right all of you get up and follow me; we're going directly to the start of the second stage."

"Where's that?" A squat rain ninja asked.

Anko grinned wolfishly. "Special training ground number forty four, better known as the Forest of Death."

The Forest of Death

Twenty teams had gathered outside training area 44. Before them was a vast forest with massive twisted trees and vegetation so thick it was hard to see how one could get through it.

"Did Iruka or Mizuki ever mention a training area like this?" Naruto asked.

"If they did I must have been out that day." Sasuke said.

"All right! Now listen up you maggots because I'm not going to explain this twice. The very first thing we'll need to do is have each and every one of you sign one of these consent forms." Anko smiled at them in a slightly blood thirsty manner. "They clear us of any liability should you be killed or terribly maimed. I mean you wouldn't want me getting in trouble now would you?" She laughed.

No one else there seemed to think it funny.

"Now I'll explain what the second phase entails and then you can sign your forms and turn them in to the little hut behind me. To put it simply the second phase will be a no holds barred survival test. Within this training ground is a tower located roughly fifteen miles from all of the gates. The training ground also contains forest, a river, and all sorts of wild animals. Within this area you're going to go through a survival test. You are free to use any weapons, jutsus, or tactics at your disposal. The test is a fight to the death version of, 'capture the flag' or in this case, 'capture the scroll.'" From out of her pockets she produced two scrolls. "There is a, 'scroll of heaven' and a, 'scroll of earth.' Your goal is to acquire both. There are twenty teams here. Half of you will receive the earth scroll to begin with and half will get the heaven scroll. So your goal is to hold on to your own scroll, capture the other from an opposing team, and bring both to the tower in the center."

"So no more than ten teams can possibly pass this test?" Sakura spoke up.

Anko nodded. "That's right. Now there are some conditions. First there's a time limit. You have exactly one hundred and twenty hours to accomplish your goal and reach the tower with both scrolls."

"That's five days!" Chouji shouted. "What are we supposed to do for food?"

"That's your problem. The forest is filled with nature's bounty. Of course it's also filled with poisonous plants, man eating monsters, and enemies. Sleep tight. Second only a full three man squad can complete the assignment. Any squad with a member killed or rendered incapacitated fails. And third you may not open the scrolls until you have reached the tower. As Chunin you will often be trusted with top secret documents. Consider this a test of your reliability."

"What happens if we open them before we get to the tower?" Kiba asked.

She smiled. "That's for those who open them to know. All right, that's all the explanation you get. Now turn in your consent forms at the hut there. We'll exchange a heaven or earth scroll for three consent forms. Then we will take each squad to a different gate. You will all begin at the same time and at the same distance from the tower. Oh, and one final piece of advice." She looked them all over. "Just don't die!"

Thanks for the advice, Naruto thought.

Once his team had gotten their heaven scroll they were led to one of the gates but an instructor. Naruto spotted team eight being led to a gate in the opposite direction.

"Hey I'll be right back," before either of his teammates could object he dashed away.

"What is that dobe doing?"

Sakura giggled. "Take a guess."

"Hey Hinata-chan!"

Hinata froze at the sound of his voice. "Na... Naruto-kun?"

Before she knew what was happening she felt him glomp onto her and press his cheek affectionately next to hers and rub it as a kitty might.

"Good luck Hinata-chan! Do your best!" And just that quickly Naruto let go of her and ran back to his team. "I'll see you in the tower!"

Hinata stood there a moment dazed by what had just happened.
Naruto-kun, he just embraced me!

Kiba sighed. *Three, two, one, and she's out.* He and Shino both automatically caught her as she fainted. "You know this is really starting to get annoying."

"We should consider ourselves fortunate," Shino stated. "Imagine if they were ever assigned to the same team."

Kiba laughed. "Yeah she'd be passing out every five minutes."

As team seven was led away a Grass kunoichi watched with an interested smile.

When the time came the instructor unlocked the gate and team seven rushed into the forest along with their many other competitors.

They spotted a small clearing and came to a momentary halt to decide what to do next.

"I can't believe they rushed us straight from one test to the next," Naruto complained.

"They probably just don't want to give us time to try and prepare anything," Sasuke said.

"It's working," Naruto said.

"Well Kakashi said it would be hard so I guess we shouldn't be surprised by anything they throw at us." Sasuke said.

"So what do we do?" Sakura asked. "We're locked in a battle ground with twenty enemy squads who have probably picked us out as easy targets."

"That's fine by me," Naruto said with a grin. "If they want to come after us that just saves us the trouble of having to track them down."

"Dummy, we shouldn't look for extra trouble." Sasuke said. "We need to get an earth scroll so we can get out of here and tot eh tower as fast as we can."

"What you afraid of a little fighting?" Naruto teased. "I absolutely can't wait! I want all the action I can get!" What he wanted was real life and death combat. What he wanted was *blood* and lots of it. Just the thought of that was making him twitch with excitement.

"This isn't a game Naruto," Sasuke said with a frown. "We need to treat this like a mission and take it seriously."

Naruto caught a scent in the air. "Heh, whatever, I'm going to take a leak." He headed towards some nearby shrubs.

"Hey Naruto don't go too far!" Sakura called. "There could be enemies anywhere!"

"Yes mother." He disappeared into the bushes.

He had just finished when he felt a kunai at his throat.

"Don't move or make a sound if you want to live!" A rasping voice said.

Naruto smiled. "Awwww, but that wouldn't be any fun!" He tried to grab the weapon.

"Fool!" The rain ninja said and shoved the tip of his knife into the soft flesh of his throat.

The second the skin broke the kid vanished in a puff of smoke.

"What the?"

"Now who's the fool?" A voice said from above.

The rain ninja looked up just in time to see five copies of the boy come down on his head.

When the rain nin came to again his respirator had been removed and he'd been tied up. He was lying on the edge of a small pond with the blond and his two teammates. The blond was kneeling over him with a ridiculous smile on his lips.

"Hi there! My name is Uzumaki Naruto! What's yours?"

The rain nin stared up at him and remained silent.

"Not going to answer my question huh? That's kind of rude." He grabbed the man by the back of his head and shoved his face into the pond. The rain ninja struggled, but with his arms and hands bound it was easy to hold him there.

"Naruto..." Sakura said. He had told them what he had in mind and they had agreed to it, but she still felt uneasy.

"This has to be done Sakura," Sasuke said quietly as he watched the ninja struggle desperately as Naruto continued to hold him under.

"It's just like when we broke all those knee caps."

"I guess," she said. She still did not like it even if it was necessary.

Naruto finally pulled him up. The man began gasping for air.

"Now let's try this again. What's your name?"

After several deep breaths the rain ninja looked at his captor with real fear. "Kagura."

"Pleased to meet you Kagura," Naruto said. "Now I've already searched you so I know you don't have a scroll on you. So I need you to tell me where your two teammates are."

"I'm not telling you anything."

"Okay." Naruto shoved him back under the water. He waited a little bit longer this time, until the struggles had begun to slacken, before pulling him up again.

"Now do you really want to die over some silly little exam?" Naruto asked.

"You... you wouldn't kill me."

"Why not?" Naruto pressed his face closer and the smile changed. The goofy good nature drained away to be replaced by a wild animalistic look. Instinctively the rain nin tried to squirm away.

"People die all the time during these exams right? Do you think anyone will even notice? If I weigh you down with stones and dump you in this pond I doubt anyone will ever even find you."

Unseen Sakura twitched a bit as she listened to this. Naruto sounded *awfully* convincing.

The rain nin thought so too. "I'll talk."

"Good boy, now tell me where they are and what jutsus they know too while you're at it."

"Great, we've got two heaven scrolls now," Sasuke told them.

At their feet were a pair of unconscious rain ninja. Knowing where they were and how they were set up it had been easy to take them out.

"It's bad luck but the odds are in our favor that the next group will have what we need." Sakura said. "Of the eighteen other scrolls still available ten will be earth scrolls and only eight will be heaven ones. That means it's likely the next team we face will have what we need."

"There's no guarantee our next fight will be as easy though," Sasuke said.

"So what? I wouldn't mind something more challenging!" Naruto said. "If we keep fighting wimps like these it'll be boring!"

A high pitched laughter descended on them from out of the forest. Instinctively they brought out their weapons and formed a triad with backs to each other.

Naruto's eyes darted across the forest and he sniffed the air, but he could not spot the source of the mocking laughter.

Out of seemingly nowhere a grass kunoichi leapt down before them. "Ku, ku, ku you should be more careful what you wish for." She had not taken out a weapon as yet and did not seem even slightly concerned about being outnumbered three to one.

"Who are you? Where are your teammates?" Sasuke demanded. With a thought he shut his eyes, when he opened them again the sharingan was fully activated.

Ah! There it is! My great prize! "Ku, ku, ku isn't it considered rude to ask someone's name without giving your own first Sasuke-kun?"

He tightened the grip on his kunai. "How do you know who I am?"

"A predator should always know about the prey." The kunoichi said. From out of a hidden pocket she produced an earth scroll. "This is what you're looking for I believe?" Unhooking her jaw she opened her mouth wide and let a long slimy tongue wrap around the scroll before swallowing it whole. "Now then, let's begin the battle for each other's scrolls with our lives on the line."

"Yaaaargh!!" Naruto and Sakura both screamed as hundreds of kunai and shuriken ripped into them.

Sasuke turned to see his two teammates writhing on the ground helpless. With his sharingan active he could see patterns of chakra surrounding them. He turned back to his smug enemy who was still just standing there. "What did you do to my friends?!"

The kunoichi smirked; his impotent rage was so cute! "Just a simple genjutsu, naturally with those marvelous eyes of yours you weren't affected." She took out a single kunai and licked its edge with her long tongue. "Your teammates are of no interest to me, I am here for you alone Sasuke-kun. Shall I dispose of them and put them out of their misery?"

Sasuke ran through some hand signs. " **Katon Goukakyuu no Jutsus.**" Out of his mouth sprang dozens of fist sized balls of fire that came at his opponent in a shower.

The kunoichi laughed as she ducked and dodged, avoiding the hail of fiery missiles. "Very good Sasuke-kun! Come show me what you can do and don't disappoint me! The lives of your friends are at stake!"

Growling he went after her, his only thought was to keep this insanely powerful enemy away from his teammates.

Sakura recovered first. After the initial shock she'd read the signs and realized it was all just a genjutsu. She had never imagined that a high level genjutsu could actually inflict pain. She would definitely have to work hard to be able to master this kind of power.

She brought her hands together and dispelled the illusion. "Kai!"

With that the weapons sticking out of her, the blood, and the pain were gone. She saw Naruto twitching next to her and touched him, freeing him as well.

He sat up and looked at her. "What... what was that?"

"That was a very high level genjutsu."

" *That* was a genjutsu?"

Sakura just gave a weary nod. Though it had not been real her body felt like it had just been punctured by a hundred weapons.

Naruto looked around. "Where the hell is Sasuke?"

As if in answer they heard the sounds of laughter and fighting coming from the forest.

A little shakily he got up to his feet. He saw that Sakura didn't seem capable of getting up yet. "Stay here Sakura-chan; I'm going to go help the teme."

"But..."

"Stay here!" Naruto leapt away.

Though she wanted to help she needed just a few minutes to recover her strength.

This is bad. Sasuke thought. He was attacking with all of his might, but every punch and kick was being blocked easily. His opponent seemed to just be playing with him.

"Enough," the grass nin finally said.

He saw the punch coming for his head, his sharingan showed the path it would take and where it would hit him. But he was not fast enough to avoid it. It slammed into his jaw and he was sent flying off the tree limb they had been on.

"Urk!" He hit the ground and managed to roll and then get back to his feet.

His enemy gave him no chance to collect his thoughts. She sent a kick into his stomach; again he saw it but was too slow to do anything but get hit. He was sent flying through the air again to crash into a tree.

"Aaaaak!" This time he tasted blood and felt a couple ribs snap.

"So is that all there is?" She asked with disappointment ringing her voice. "A couple mediocre fire jutsus and some hand to hand? Not bad for a child but I expected more from you Sasuke-kun. Are you really *his* brother?"

"Wha... what?" He looked up. "What did you say?"

Chuckling the kunoichi delivered a kick to his side that broke another rib and made him cry out in fresh pain. "Ku, ku, ku you're nothing compared to him. Just a pale reflection of what a *true* sharingan user is. I came all the way here Sasuke-kun just to meet you. I was so hoping to find you worthy of my interest. You have no idea what a disappointment you are."

The kunoichi grabbed him by the shirt and lifted him into the air. "I had thought about giving you a very special gift, but I see that would be wasted on one such as you. Still... you have the Uchiha blood in

you and that's worth something." She began to laugh. "I'll take you back to my lab and dissect you. With your eyes and your DNA I can start a whole new series of experiments!" She reared back and threw him with all of her might towards a tree. The kunoichi watched expecting to see him slam painfully into it.

Instead he was caught out of the air by his blonde teammate.

Naruto got both arms around Sasuke and landed with him on a nearby tree branch. He could see Sasuke was bloodied and battered; he had taken a beating and was barely able to stand on his own. "You all right Sasuke?"

"Na... Naruto," Sasuke gasped through the pain. "Get out of here, she's way too strong."

"Don't worry, it'll be all right."

Red chakra began to surround him as he carefully put Sasuke down on the branch. He could feel all the power surging through him. He could feel his body changing, his eyes becoming red, his teeth becoming fanged and his hands clawed. He stared down hatefully at the person who had not only hurt him but his teammates as well.

She was staring up at the boy who was now completely surrounded in demonic chakra. "Ku, ku, ku what have we here? Hmmm, I wonder if my trip here might not have been wasted after all."

" I'm going to kill you." Naruto declared.

Laughter rang out. "Well come and try by all means, but please don't disappoint me."

He launched himself and covered the distance in an eye blink. One punch connected and sent the foreign kunoichi flying into and then through a tree. Naruto did not hold back. He chased after her before she had even stopped rolling along the ground. In a flurry a series of

punches and kicks all landed, the kunoichi had no chance at all of blocking them.

" This is for what you did to my friends!" He howled as a last kick sent his enemy into the ground in a heap. Having completely crushed her he was ready to end it and began forming hand signs. **"And now you can die. Kaze Subeta no Jutsu!"**

Charged with the Kyuubi's power a hundred unseen blades formed in the air around him, and then flew at his helpless target. There could be no escape from so many at such a short range. The kunoichi's body was sliced and chopped as though put through a grater. Tiny pieces were thrown up into the air.

Where they turned to mud.

What the?

The ground at his feet burst open and the grass nin leapt out slamming a hand onto his cloak. **" Five part seal!"** The red chakra dissolved around the hand which went through and struck his stomach. The clothing beneath the fingers burned away until they touched Naruto's hidden seal. Naruto gasped and shook, his chakra cloak twisted and stirred for an instant and then vanished. Naruto fell wordlessly to the ground.

"Superb! Absolutely magnificent! Were I anyone else you would have killed me!" Staring down at the unconscious form fresh plans were forming. *So, Minato didn't kill the Kyuubi after all eh? What a shame I can't take possession of your body Naruto-kun. But there are some things even I don't dare to try. Were I to accidentally break your seal it would be the end of me. But there are other ways to use that power inside of you. I will make you love me, and turn you into my most precious servant.*

"Get away from him!" A girl shouted.

Orochimaru looked up to see the pink haired girl standing here with a kunai in her hand.

How amusing, I'd forgotten how ridiculously heroic the ninja of my village could be. "No need to worry, he's only asleep right now. I wouldn't hurt Naruto-kun; in fact he's just become very important to me. So important I think I'll give him a very special gift."

Fangs extended out of her mouth and her neck popped out and twisted like some sort of snake. With relish the kunoichi bit down onto Naruto's neck and injected him. Naruto's eyes popped open.

"AAAAAAAARGGHH!!!" He began screaming mindlessly.

"Naruto!" Sakura ran to him ignoring the obvious danger. "What did you do?!" She screamed.

"Given him a little something for the future. A special gift, one that normally kills nine times out of ten. But somehow I'm sure he'll survive." Opening her mouth wide the earth scroll popped out and was spat onto the ground. "Consider that another present. Take him to the tower as fast as you can and see he gets treated." Orochimaru began to slowly melt into the earth. "And do be sure to tell him I look forward to seeing him again one day."

With that Orochimaru was gone.

Mercifully Naruto was soon unconscious. Though badly hurt Sasuke put him on his back and carried him to the tower.

Two other teams were already there when team seven arrived. At the top of the tower a red haired boy watched without much interest. Three more potential victims to help him feel alive.

Someone else who saw the arrival reacted far differently.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata shouted. "What happened?"

"He was hurt during a fight," Sasuke said. He wasn't about to share the details with anyone except Kakashi or the Hokage.

"Hinata do you know where the medical facilities are here?" Sakura asked.

"Yes! Follow me!" Together they brought him into the tower and to those who might be able to help him.

So it is done

Three figures stood in a secure room within the tower located at the center of training ground 44.

Anko bowed low in abject apology. She wasn't the sort to say sorry or regret what she did. Most people thought she was rude as hell and more than a little psychotic. It was a reputation she treasured. Now though she was really truly sorry.

"Please forgive me Hokage-sama! Though I found him there was nothing I could do to stop him. I would gladly have traded my life for his, but in the end I was powerless."

Sarutobi calmly nodded and placed a hand on her shoulder as if he were her grandfather trying to comfort her. "No one blames you for that Anko; your old sensei is one of the Sannin after all. And I know the seal placed on you leaves you especially vulnerable to him."

She lowered her head in shame. Even after all this time, even after all her work, she'd still been nothing but Orochimaru's throw away toy.

"What exactly did he say to you?" The Hokage asked.

"He told me his only interest was in one particular boy," she made a face. "He actually mentioned 'trading up' though I'm not sure what he meant by that."

"He was likely talking about Uchiha Sasuke," the third person in the room said. "From what Sasuke said Orochimaru claimed to have come here for him."

"But instead he seems to have shifted his focus onto Naruto," Sarutobi said unhappily.

"Well the dirty pedophile threatened to unleash hell if we called off the exams," Anko continued. "Though I wouldn't trust anything that bastard said. What are your orders Hokage-sama?"

"I have already ordered ANBU reinforcements to comb the forest in search of him," the Hokage said. "Though I fear we will find no trace. For now the ANBU have been ordered to avoid the candidates still in the field and to mask their presence. We shall continue with the exams for the time being. Please continue to monitor the situation and inform me of any changes."

"Will do," Anko said with a bit of her usual spark.

Sarutobi waited until she had gone. "You've examined Naruto?"

"I sure have old man," Jiraiya replied.

"And?"

"And the kid's a mess," Jiraiya said flatly. "Orochimaru placed two seals on him. He put a five point seal over the original one that's suppressed most of the Kyuubi's power. I've decided to go ahead and leave that one in place for now, removing it is no big deal. It's the other seal on his shoulder that's the problem."

"I know," Sarutobi spoke in a grave tone. "The medic nins tell me his chakra system is fluctuating wildly, putting his life in severe danger. Can you get rid of this curse seal?"

Jiraiya slowly shook his head. "Sorry old man, but that would be impossible. It turns out it's connected to Orochimaru's life force somehow. So long as Orochimaru is alive it can't be removed."

"Can you at least suppress it? Whatever that seal is meant to do I want it stopped!"

"Now that I think should be possible, but I'll have to wait until he recovers first. The strength for the seal has to come from the victim,

if I do it now I'm sure it would kill him."

"The medic nins tell me he may die anyway," Sarutobi said. "Is there anything you can do to improve his odds?"

"You know better than that old man," Jiraiya chided. "I don't know the exact nature of this curse seal. If I were to start adding anything new there's no telling what might happen. Once he recovers I'll help him, but until then we should leave it to the medic nins."

"I am very worried he may not recover," Sarutobi said.

"He's Minato's kid right? I'm sure he'll live."

Naruto remained unconscious for the rest of the day and into the night. Medic nins did what they could to ease his pain with jutsus and with antibiotics. But whatever they tried he remained unresponsive and consumed by a high fever. Naruto tossed and turned and moaned weakly as his body was covered in sweat.

Hinata, Sakura, and Sasuke stayed at his side as he fitfully slept. Kakashi had also been summoned and had come to see him. He had left though to join the ANBU who were searching the forest.

It was three in the morning and a bleary eyed Sasuke was looking at his unconscious friend. He was the only one awake at the moment. Sakura was curled up in the second infirmary bed in the room. Hinata was seated in a chair by his side, but her face and arms were lying peacefully on Naruto's bed right next to him. *If she wakes up like that she'll probably turn red and pass out.*

"You know dobe, I used to really not like you," Sasuke said quietly. He wasn't sure why, but he needed to say something and right now seemed the ideal time. "I thought you were an idiot with all your stupid pranks and your dumb bragging about being Hokage. When you got put on my team all I could think about was how it was going

to slow me down. You better believe I never thought I would ever need you to come and rescue me."

' I'll take you back to my lab and dissect you. With your eyes and your DNA I can start a whole new series of experiments!'

"You threw yourself at Orochimaru and wound up like this to help me. I... I didn't ask you to do that! And if you think I'll be in your debt you can just plain forget about it. I'll definitely pay you back dobe. So until then you're not allowed to die, got that? Besides, how are you going to be Hokage if you don't recover? You're always going Hokage this and Hokage that. So you definitely have to get better for that reason too right?"

Reaching down he placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "Any way you can't leave just after I finally learned how to tolerate you, okay?"

A helpless child wept.

"I'm sorry! Whatever I did I'm sorry! I'm a good boy, I am!" Shaking he pushed himself further into the alley's corner. There was garbage and dirt and dog shit, but he didn't notice. All he saw were the angry faces closing in on him. All of them with the same eyes. Those damned hateful eyes.

"Demon," an old woman hissed.

"Monster!"

"Killer!"

"Why won't you just die?!"

They threw things at him, rotten fruit, beer bottles, small rocks. He covered himself up and closed his eyes. The ANBU would come; they always came before he could be killed. But somehow they

never came before he was hurt. "What did I do?!" The little boy wailed. "Please! Just tell me what I did! Whatever it is I'm sorry!"

As he waited for the beating to start the angry voices all seemed to fade away.

"So this is what you are in your heart? Just a pathetic scared little boy."

Naruto looked up.

Everything was gone.

Not just the mob but the alley, the sky, the ground, they were all gone. There was just white as far as the eye could see.

And there was himself. The five year old Naruto was looking at the twelve year old him. The older Naruto was in his orange jump suit glaring at him.

"So is this all you are?!" The older boy demanded. "I thought you were supposed to be an adult, that you were through being a child. But here you are crying, hiding, *begging*... you're pathetic!"

"I can't help it!" The little boy whined. "I just want people to like me, that's all!"

"But they don't like you do they? Everyone has always hated you haven't they?"

"Not everyone! Jiji is nice to me! And Ayame and Teuchi... and..." The boy was trying to think.

"Three people in a village of thousands? Feh, they're just the exceptions that prove the rule!"

"They're not the only ones! Kakashi, Sasuke, and Sakura are all nice to me."

"Wrong! They're your teammates; they tolerate you because they have to. Don't forget how those two used to treat you! They only changed because they have to work with you! Kakashi will treat you in whatever way makes it easier for him to control you." The older Naruto growled.

"Hinata-chan..."

"Hinata-chan," the other Naruto said. "Well, every male needs a mate. But just remember she doesn't know what you really are."

"Oh," the little boy said sadly. "I forgot."

"Pretty big thing to forget." He approached and the smaller boy scrambled back. "You don't need to be afraid, I'm you after all. I am the only thing you can trust; I am the Kyuubi's power. I am the only one who will never betray you." He held his hand out. "Take my hand and I will wash clean your pain."

The little boy looked up curiously. "What happens if I take it?"

"Oh nothing bad," he said with a smile. "I'll simply lend you some of strength. Your mind is unsure and your will is weak. I will just give you a little bit of my resolve. I'll strengthen your mind just like I've been strengthening your body and your chakra system. I'll take away your doubts and the pain you've always felt. I'll make you what you should be, what you *need* to be."

"What's that?"

"A monster."

"But... but I don't want to be a monster! I want to be like everyone else, I want to have friends like everyone else."

"You're not like everyone else! You're the Kyuubi; you were made for killing and destroying, *not* for making friends. Think about it! What's

happened to you every time you've tried to make friends? What's happened every single time you've opened your heart to someone?"

"I... I get hurt," the little boy said miserably. "I try to be good, but people always hurt me."

"You want it to stop don't you? All that hurting?"

"Yes."

"Then just take my hand and accept what I'm offering you. If you do that no one will ever be able to hurt you again."

Little Naruto looked at the outstretched hand. "I won't hurt anymore? Really?"

"Your body may bleed, but your heart will be safe. I promise you."

"That's what I want, I want to stop hurting."

"Then take my hand."

"All... all right." Getting up the child carefully reached out and placed his small hand into the palm of the other Naruto.

The older boy closed his hand around the other and laughed. "So it is done."

Naruto opened his eyes.

"Naruto-kun! You're awake!" Hinata threw her arms around him and hugged him with all her might. For once not worrying about being embarrassed.

"I'll go and get the doctor!" Sakura hurried out.

Sasuke stood over him and gave him a slight grin and nod.

"Welcome back dobe, how do you feel?"

With one hand he began to stroke Hinata's hair as he smiled up at Sasuke. "I feel great, in fact I feel better than I ever have in my life."

The first hook

"So how are you feeling Naruto?" The Hokage asked as he sat down at his bedside.

Seeing the Hokage's concern gave Naruto a warm feeling. "I'm feeling just fine old man. I'm ready to get back to the exams."

"Oh ho! Sounds like you've recovered just fine then!" A new voice said. A man with spiky white hair and red lines drawn down from his eyes entered the room.

"Who are you?" Naruto asked.

For just a second there was a suspicious look in Naruto's eyes. One he had often seen in a former teammate's. He decided not to give any reaction to it though. A spymaster knew how to keep secrets after all. "Me? I'm Jiraiya, and yes, before you ask, I'm *that* Jiraiya. The one and only Toad sage, member of the Sannin, and author extraordinaire."

"Never heard of you," Naruto said flatly.

Jiraiya fell face forward.

"You really should have paid more attention to your lessons Naruto," The Hokage said scolding slightly. "Jiraiya is a former student of mine and was a teammate to the person you fought in the forest. He is actually rather famous for being not only one of the three ninja of legend but the sensei to the Yondaime Hokage."

"*You* were the Yondaime's sensei?" Naruto asked. He flashed him a huge smile. "Any chance you could maybe show me a thing or two?"

"Sorry kid, my teaching days are long in the past."

"I asked Jiraiya here because he is, among his other talents, a sealmaster. Given the events that occurred in Hikedo I wanted him to check on you."

"So he... ah, knows about that?" Naruto asked.

Sasuke and the others had been asked to leave so it was just the three of them in his room.

"Yeah I know kid, there's no need to worry, I've got experience in keeping secrets. Like the old man said I was called in to check on your seal. Given what happened to you it's really lucky I was already available."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know what happened to you out there?"

"I lost a fight," Naruto admitted unhappily.

"It was a bit more serious than just losing a fight Naruto," the Hokage said. "The person you faced was Orochimaru, also a former student of mine and a Sannin. That you and your teammates even survived the encounter speaks very highly of all of you."

"Wait a minute, why would an elite ninja be taking the Chunin exams?"

"He wasn't taking them Naruto," the Hokage said. "He had infiltrated them in order to approach Sasuke."

"But apparently he found you to be more interesting." Jiraiya said.

Naruto snorted. "Well that's a first."

"This is no joking matter, Naruto. During your encounter he placed two seals on you, including a curse seal whose purpose we don't understand." The Hokage said.

Naruto rubbed the seal at the base of his neck. "Yeah, now that you mention it I do remember that freak biting me. It hurt like hell." He looked a bit worried. "So I have *another* seal on me? And you don't know what it does?"

"You have two new seals on you kid, but the other one is no big deal. As for the other we may not know what it does exactly, but you can bet it's nothing good. You very nearly died last night because the effects of that seal had your chakra coil system running wild. That's why if you're feeling up to it I'm going to suppress it for you."

"Huh? Don't you mean remove?"

"Unfortunately that's not an option kid," Jiraiya said. "The curse seal is somehow connected to Orochimaru's life force. That means as long as he's alive there's no way to permanently get rid of it. The best we can do is suppress it and limit its affect on you."

Naruto frowned. To be honest it didn't seem all that bad at all. When he'd woken up he'd not only felt good he'd felt himself bursting with energy. He was ready to take on the world. He wondered if the curse seal was really as bad as they were making it out to be. He thought he'd had some nightmares, but whatever he might have been dreaming had been forgotten.

He tossed the covers of his bed aside and got out of bed. "Fine, whatever, let's get this over with so I can get back to the exams."

The Hokage had a relived smile. Obviously the curse seal could not have had too much of an effect if Naruto was in such fine spirits. "I am glad to see your setbacks haven't discouraged you."

Naruto laughed. "If I was the sort to get easily discouraged I'd have given up on my dreams a long time ago. Keep an eye on me old man! I'm the one who'll win this thing, no matter what!"

"Honestly Naruto," the Hokage said. "It wouldn't surprise me if you did."

"You wish to change targets?" Kabuto asked.

"Yessssss, I want you to get as close as you can to Naruto-kun. I want to know everything about him."

"And what about Sasuke?"

"Hmmm, he can wait. Perhaps if I allow him to ripen a bit he will become more interesting. Naruto is the one that matters now."

"I understand Lord Orochimaru."

"So what do we do now?" Naruto asked. Subconsciously his hand drifted to the now suppressed seal on his shoulder and rubbed it. Besides it feeling sore he was completely fine.

He was with his teammates just outside the tower. There was a fenced off area of two hundred yards surrounding the tower. This was a secure zone and, supposedly, a place of safety.

"There's not much we can do," Sasuke said. "This is only the second day of the test; we have to wait three more days for the second phase to be over. Until then we're pretty much on our own. The only rules are we can't leave the tower grounds and we can't fight with the other teams."

"Can we do some training then?"

Sakura grinned. "After what you went through you already want to work out again? Are you sure you feel up to it Naruto? You were really hurt."

"I'm fine Sakura-chan," he assured. "You know me, I always heal fast."

"Well, if you want we could do some light work outs," Sasuke said. "But let's not use any jutsus and nothing above basic taijutsu. There are two other teams here, no reason to give anything away."

Naruto nodded. To be honest he wasn't too worried what anyone might see. According to the old man the person he'd fought was considered one of the most powerful ninja in the world. He had lost, but held his own during the brief fight. He had no doubts he would be more than a match for anyone who really was just a Genin. As he and his team were discussing what sort of work out to have they noticed team eight leave the tower.

Specifically Kiba and Shino were carting Hinata in the air between them, each holding her up by one arm.

"Kiba-kun, Shino-kun, please don't do this," a red faced Hinata cried.

"Sorry Hinata, but it's for your own good." Kiba said with a smirk.

Shino nodded. "We both feel you have been distracted since Naruto's arrival. We feel this course of action most likely to restore your full focus."

"But this is so embarrassing!" She wailed.

Kiba laughed. "Right, and passing out every time he talks to you isn't?"

Naruto and his teammates watched as Hinata was brought before them and set down right in front of Naruto.

"Hinata has something she wants to ask you Naruto," Kiba said.

"Ooooookay, what is it Hinata-chan?" Her scent was nothing but raw fear and panic. Not that he needed her scent to tell him that. Her face was as red as a tomato and she was pressing her fingers together like mad.

"I, uh... wa... was ah, I was..."

"She wants to know if you'd have a picnic with her," Kiba announced.

"Kiba!!"

"Sorry Hinata, but I sort of have plans for the next hour."

"While Hinata is aware your first date was scheduled for after the exams were complete she is anxious to spend time with you since you were so seriously hurt. Therefore she was hoping you would be agreeable to having your first date now." Shino said in his usual unemotional voice.

"That is so sweet!" Sakura cooed excitedly.

Even Sasuke found it amusing. "Well, that's one way to spend your free time."

"Hey Naruto," Kiba said. "Think you could answer before she passes out?"

"You... you don't ne... need to! I... I was just..." Hinata struggled.

"A picnic sounds great Hinata-chan!"

Hinata froze and stared at him. "Re... really?"

"Sure! I mean we both have some free time and what guy wouldn't like to have a picnic with a cutie like you?"

Don't faint! Don't faint! Don't faint! "I, ah, I cou... could get some sandwiches from the cafeteria. I'm so... sorry but I can't cook for you here."

"No problem Hinata-chan, I'll wait until our next date to taste your cooking."

Next date?! Equal measures of panic and excitement shot through her system. "Please wait Naruto-kun! I'll go and get the sandwiches!"

She took off running back to the tower afraid he might change his mind.

Sakura giggled. "Now there's a girl who has it bad." She looked shyly over at Sasuke. "I really envy her; the boy she likes actually pays attention to her."

"Hn."

"Hey Naruto, while she's not around I want to make something real clear to you," Kiba said. "Hinata's a real nice girl and her feelings for you are totally genuine. So if you do anything to break her heart I'll break your head. Got it?" Akamaru barked angrily and Shino nodded.

"Awww, I would never do anything to hurt her," Naruto said. "Just the opposite, I plan on keeping her close to me from now on."

Hinata couldn't believe that she was finally on a date with Naruto-kun. It wasn't quite what she'd imagined, no candlelight, no soft music, and the meal was nothing but some sandwiches and tea from a thermos.

But Naruto was here beside her and he was paying attention to her. That was plenty to make her dream come true.

"Thank you Naruto-kun," she said in a small sincere voice once the food was gone and they were just sitting there in the grass.

"Huh? Thanks for what Hinata-chan? I didn't do anything."

"Yes you did! You agreed to have this picnic with me even though I'm... I'm nothing special."

"What are you talking about Hinata-chan? You're like a princess! Everyone in the whole village acknowledges you. Me? I'm the village outcast, the one everyone hates or ignores. If anybody should be

grateful here it should be me. I mean come on; I'm really not the sort of guy you belong with."

"That's not so! I've watched you for a long time Naruto-kun! I've seen how hard you've struggled. I've seen you practice until you dropped from exhaustion. I've seen you keep trying when no one would help you or even acknowledge you. Through it all you've never doubted yourself even for a second! I... I've always ad... admired you Naruto-kun, I've always wished I could have even half as much self confidence."

"Thanks Hinata-chan," he said. "That... that means a lot to me. I'm really happy you feel that way about me, you're probably the only one in the whole village who sees me that way." He turned away from her slightly. "I only wish those feelings could last."

"What... what do you me... mean Naruto-kun? My fe... feelings are real!"

He could smell fear and confusion coming from her. *I have to do this just right.* He looked back at her with a sad expression. "I know your feelings are real Hinata-chan, I mean you wouldn't be here with me otherwise. But what happens when people find out about us?"

"What do you mean?"

"The entire village loves you and hates me," he said. "What do you think will happen when they find out you like me? Everyone, and I do mean everyone, will tell you to get away from me. They'll probably even say things like I'm using you and don't really care about you. You'll get pressure from everywhere to stop liking me."

"I wouldn't care about that Naruto-kun! I know how special you are and how people have treated you! I know you've never done anything to deserve it. I don't care what anyone says about you, it wouldn't change how I feel."

"What about your family? How would they react to you being with me Hinata-chan?" She looked down and the fear scent got suddenly stronger. *Oh, so she's really worried about her family huh?*

"My... my father might not approve," she said in a small voice.

He waited but she said nothing else.

Naruto quickly got up to his feet. "I see, then I guess it's best we not have another date."

"What?! Wh... why?"

He looked down at her with soft eyes. "Because I think I could really start to care for you Hinata-chan. If there's no chance we can be together it's best to just end things right here. It would hurt me too much to fall in love with you and then have you hate me like everyone else does."

Naruto-kun thinks he could fall in love with me?! "Naruto-kun I could never hate you! You're the one I like and admire the most in this whole world! I could never feel hatred for you."

"Not even if your father hates me? Not even if he does everything he can to turn you against me?"

"No! Never!" She reached up to take a hold of his hand. "If father feels that way I will change his mind and make him see the real you."

You don't know the real me Hinata, no one does. "What if he hates me no matter what? What then?"

"Even if father hates you I never will."

"Promise Hinata-chan?"

She nodded her head vigorously. "I promise! I won't let anyone change how I feel about you."

Looking he relieved he sank back down to sit next to her. The first hook was now firmly in place. *I need to be very careful and very patient. I need her to always think it's her choice.*

"Yosh! We are triumphant!" A boy in a green leotard cried out as he and his team arrived at the tower perimeter. "We have proven the power of youth!"

Neji gave a weary sigh. "Don't get carried away, all this means is we've passed the second phase of the exams. There's still a long way to go." Holding both scrolls he headed towards the tower.

Being focused on his goal he didn't notice a couple sitting on the grass talking.

But Tenten did. "Hey Neji, isn't that your cousin over there?"

In great surprise he looked over. Even without the byakugan active he could clearly make out that it was indeed Hinata. She was sitting quite *casually* next to some boy he didn't recognize. "What is she doing? Who is that?" He changed direction in mid step to go and confront the situation.

Tenten grabbed him by the arm. "Whoa tiger! Hold on! Don't you think we should check in first and actually complete the second phase *before* you go and cause a scene? Anyway, it just looks like she'd being friendly with someone. What's wrong with that?"

"There is a great deal wrong with it," Neji said stiffly.

"I think it is wonderful! The fires of youth are burning bright in both of them! I must congratulate them!"

This time both Neji and Tenten grabbed a hold of Lee before he could act.

"All right," Neji said in annoyance. "Let's check in first and formally complete the second test." *I'll have words with Lady Hinata later.*

A bloody oath

The tower was large enough to allow everyone a private room. It was also big enough to allow the four teams who had arrived thus far to avoid each other if they wanted. Other than the cafeteria there was no other section of the building they all used in common. And since the cafeteria was kept open most of the day it was not hard for teams to arrive, eat, and depart before any of the competition arrived. The team from Suna deliberately avoided meeting any of the others. Team Gai was slightly less aloof and could be seen training both outside and in the tower's dojo. They however made no special effort to talk to anyone. Teams seven and eight agreed to share most meals and got along rather well. They had a sort of connection thanks to Naruto and Hinata and they did all know each other from academy days of course.

Though they got along they were wary not to be *too* friendly. No one talked about jutsus or about their training and gave only the vaguest descriptions of what they had seen during the exams.

With one exception.

"You guys need to stay away from the team from Suna, especially the red haired kid." Kiba told them. Just the mention of him made Akamaru begin to whimper and crawl inside his master's coat.

Naruto couldn't help but grin. "What's the matter? You sound scared."

"If you'd seen what he did to the Mist nins he ran into you'd be scared too."

Naruto lifted a single eyebrow. Kiba had been in his class for only one year and he didn't really know him that well. But he had certainly never seemed to be the sort to admit when an enemy scared him.

"Kiba-kun is right Naruto," Hinata said. "He killed three ninja all by himself using sand. One he played with and killed when he was helpless, the other two after they had already surrendered and given up their scroll. He slaughtered them for no reason."

"That's awful!" Sakura said. "Have you told the administrators? If he murdered them after they surrendered he should be punished."

"While I concur with your opinion reporting the offense would be futile," Shino said in a bland voice.

"How come?" Sakura asked.

"Prior to entering the exams I researched all available material on them." Shino said. "One of the rules the villages all adhere to is that a candidate may not be punished for anything that occurs in the course of the exams, not even by his own village. The villages would not participate without that stipulation."

"Hn, so in other words even cold blooded murder is okay so long as it's done during the exams?" Sasuke asked.

"That is correct," Shino said.

"So please avoid him at all costs!" Hinata said. "Even if it means failing that's better than getting killed."

Naruto shook his head slightly. "Sorry Hinata-chan, I can't win the exams unless I beat the strongest out there."

Hinata looked very worried.

"It's your funeral if you try it," Kiba said. "I don't know what that kid's story is, but he's deadly."

On the third day a team from some back woods village arrived. Their leader had bandages covering half his face. They also avoided

interacting with others.

On the fourth day, to the shock of the other leaf teams, team ten arrived.

"How the hell did you guys make it?!" Somehow after nearly dying to complete the second stage seeing these guys here too really annoyed him.

Since Sasuke was there too Ino quickly wiped her face and gave her hair a quick comb through before answering with a glowing smile. "We took advantage of the opportunities provided and were able to use our incredible team abilities to successfully navigate the course successfully. It was mostly thanks to my leadership of course." She leaned forward and batted her eyelashes. "Are you impressed Sasuke-kun?"

"A little," he admitted. "I know how hard it is to get here."

"But how did you do it?" Naruto asked.

Ino was just about to give a smug reply when Shikamaru spoke up. "A guy came over to pee in the same bushes we were hiding in and I grabbed him using my jutsu. It turns out he had the scroll we needed."

"Then we ran here as fast as we could," Chouji added between handfuls of chips. "We got here without running into anyone."

An amused grin touched Sasuke's lips. "So in other words you succeeded through pure dumb luck?"

"Yeah pretty much," Shikamaru agreed.

"Shut up you lazy jerk!!" Ino screamed and began to beat him mercilessly.

On the fifth and final day of the exams Naruto and Hinata decided to have a second picnic. Once they had eaten Naruto decided to rest putting his head in Hinata's lap. At first the little girl had blushed like mad and felt on the verge of collapse. Slowly though she got used to it, the more time she spent with Naruto the more she acclimated to his presence. She even began to run a hand through his spiky blond hair a little. It still thrilled her that Naruto was willing to spend time with someone like her.

"The second phase ends in, what, four more hours?" Naruto asked.

Hinata checked her wrist watch and nodded. "Yes, about that."

"Then it's on to phase three I guess," Naruto said. "Do you think it will start right away?" Since phase two had started immediately on the heels of phase one all of them were prepared for the same to happen again.

"I don't know, but if it does at least we're all well rested."

"Yeah," he said. He shut his eyes and felt the warm sun on his face. It was a long time since he'd been so relaxed. His head resting on her lap, her finger running through his hair, her gentle scent filling his conscious. There were a hundred tiny pleasures in having someone really care for you. All sorts of little secret joys that came from having a caring girlfriend like her.

He was just starting to drift off when the pungent scent of fear ruined Hinata's scent. He opened his eyes and noted someone approaching them. He was a boy with dark brown shorts, a grey shirt, brown cap, and pupiless eyes that were white rather than the lilac of Hinata's. "A friend of yours?"

"He... he's m... my bi... big brother."

He slowly sat up next to her. "I thought you only had a younger sister, you didn't mention a big brother."

"Tha... that's wha... what I ca... call him. He... he's my cou... cousin."

The closer he came the stronger her fear scent and the more desperately she pressed her fingers together. As he neared his scent changed too. It became tinted with fury. When his pale eyes flickered towards him the anger scent grew noticeably stronger. He moved stiffly and came to an almost rigid stance before them.

He opened his mouth to speak but before he could Naruto leapt to his feet. "Hi! Pleased to meet you! I'm Uzumaki Naruto, who are you?" He stuck his hand out with the biggest cheesiest grin he could manage.

The boy stared at him in disbelief; his eyes flickered contemptuously at the outstretched hand. "I am Hyuuga Neji," he said without making a move to shake hands.

Naruto deliberately kept his hand out. "Isn't it considered really rude not to shake someone's hand when it's extended to you? I would have expected someone from the Hyuuga clan to have better manners than that."

The boy's eyes expanded, obviously not believing what he'd just heard. "What did you just say to me?"

Naruto kept his big happy smile shining. "I said you're being rude by not shaking my hand. Does being a Hyuuga make you too good for common courtesies?"

Hinata was on her feet between them, her eyes fearfully darting from one to the other. "Naruto, please..."

"You obviously don't know your proper place," Neji said coldly. "Handshakes are for equals."

Naruto *still* had his hand out waiting. "Well then what's the problem? We are equals."

"You think you're my equal?" Neji asked with a look of disgust.

"Sure! We're both Genin of the Hidden Leaf village, that makes us equals."

"Idiot! I am a member of the cadet branch of the Hyuuga clan! While not as lofty as some," he sent Hinata a look that made her shrink back. "That still makes me of infinitely greater importance than some worthless orphan."

Now Naruto drew back his hand. "Yeah, a lot of people think that way. But I don't really care what a person's last name is or where they come from. I only ever judge people for who they are. For instance even though you and Hinata-chan are both from the same clan I think the world of her while you're just a rude jerk."

Neji clenched his jaw and tightened his fists. "I think you need to be taught some respect."

"What a coincidence! I was thinking the exact same thing!"

The two boys stared each other down.

"You ca... can't fight here!" Hinata said pleadingly. "If, if you fight you'll be expelled from the exams!"

"That's true," Neji admitted and focused his attention on her. "You should come with me Lady Hinata. People will get the wrong impression if you continue to spend time alone with someone who is so far below you."

"I do... don't thi... think Naruto-kun is below me. I... I am ve... very happy to spend time with him."

"I see," Neji replied. "I wonder what your father will think of this. In any case since you seem to be so content I will leave you be for now." He sent Naruto a last look before leaving.

"Well he was pleasant."

"Naruto-kun please don't make Neji your enemy!"

"Don't worry Hinata-chan I won't hurt him... much."

"But he might hurt you! He's considered a prodigy and is very powerful."

He placed a warm hand on her cheek. "You don't need to worry about me Hinata-chan; I can take care of myself."

With just over an hour remaining one final team made it in. It was a leaf squad that included Kabuto.

"The second phase is now complete with 21 successful applicants from seven teams." Anko announced. "As per the rules we will be having a preliminary round prior to the third phase. The second phase is now officially complete."

The Hokage nodded. "Very well, let us continue the exams as scheduled. We will keep an eye out for Orochimaru. Assemble the teams."

"Yes," Anko answered.

"Please go out with me! I swear I will protect you with my life!"

Sakura froze. A weird boy with ridiculously thick eyebrows and a green leotard was standing in front of her. She nervously looked about at all the others in the underground arena. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes!" The boy cried out in ecstasy. "You are a beautiful pink haired angel come to earth!"

Naruto just couldn't resist. "You're in luck, she doesn't have a boyfriend and I know for a fact she likes dark haired guys with really bad hairstyles."

"Really?!"

Sakura sent him a look of betrayal.

Before the thick browed kid could say anything more a girl with her hair in two buns grabbed him by the collar. "Lee! Stop flirting and come on!"

"But Tenten..."

"Now!" She dragged him off even as he struggled.

"Thanks a lot!" Sakura said glaring at Naruto.

"Hey," he said innocently. "I was just trying to get you a date."

"Quiet down you two," Sasuke said. "It looks like the Hokage is going to speak."

Along the railing at the front of the arena were the Hokage, Jiraiya, the examiners, and all the team senseis. The Hokage congratulated all of them for passing the second phase and began to talk about the meaning of the exams when a sickly looking ninja leapt down to the arena floor.

"Pardon me Hokage-sama, but as third phase proctor please allow me, Gekkou Hayate, to proceed from this point?"

The Hokage nodded his consent and the pale ninja turned around to face the applicants. "Hello everyone, I am Hayate. Before we can proceed to the third phase I am afraid we are going to have to have a preliminary to see who will be allowed to participate."

"What do you mean?" Ino shouted. "We all passed why shouldn't we all get to participate?"

"Well, while I don't mean to say the first two tests were easy too many of you have passed. The finals will be a major event attended by many very important people. For that reason it's important that the action be kept fast flowing. Too many bouts would slow things down; therefore we are going to have a series of one to one fights to determine who is really qualified to continue."

The news was not well received and an unhappy murmur rose.

Naruto's mouth remained firmly shut; his eyes were up on the Hokage. *I don't care what it takes I am not going to lose! Watch me old man! I'm going to show you how far I've come!*

"Before we begin are there any of you who wish to resign? From here on out you will be competing as individuals so you have no duty to your teammates and can decide to continue or not solely for your own reasons."

Kabuto casually leaned over to one of his teammates and whispered something. The man turned to stare at him. Despite having dark spectacles and a black veil over most of his face he was clearly upset by whatever it was that had been said.

Kabuto simply mouthed the word, 'obey.'

The man swallowed and slowly raised his hand. "I wish to quit," he announced bitterly.

Hayate scanned a clip board in his hand. "You're Akado Yoroi? All right you can go."

The man walked away with his head down, clearly unhappy.

Odd, the Hokage thought. He'd noted the slight interaction with Kabuto. *What happened there?*

"Anyone else?" Hayate asked.

No one else offered to quit.

"Very well, we will immediately begin a series of ten one to one fights. The winners will move on to the finals while the losers will be eliminated. There are basically no rules. The fight continues until one of you dies or is knocked out or admits defeat. If you don't want to die then quickly acknowledge you are beaten. Since we don't want a blood bath I will intervene if I believe the winner has been clearly decided, but don't count on me. For your own safety give up as soon as you feel yourself being overwhelmed."

Above them was a loud, 'whirring' sound as a massive screen slid out of the wall.

"The screen up there will list two names pulled at random announcing the next match. While it is a bit abrupt we will now begin with the first match."

All eyes looked up as the screen came to life. Two names were outlined in electric light.

Uchiha Sasuke vs. Yakushi Kabuto

"I want the combatants to remain, everyone else please exit the arena floor."

Right off the bat huh? Sasuke looked over to the silver haired teenager. They'd met just before the start of the exams. *This is the seventh time he's been in the exams; he can't be that strong if it's taken him this long to get here.*

"Kick his ass Sasuke," Naruto said enthusiastically.

"Good luck Sasuke-kun!" Sakura told him.

"Try not to get killed," Kakashi said as he accompanied his other two students to the stairs.

Sasuke ignored that and turned to face a friendly Kabuto. "Let's do our best Sasuke."

He nodded. "Right."

Standing between them Hayate made a signal. "Begin!"

Sasuke ran through some hand signs. He would try not to use lethal force but he wanted to end this fight as fast as he could. **"Katon Gokakyu no Jutsu."** From out of his mouth he spewed a giant ball of fire and sent it rolling towards his opponent. Sasuke wasn't sure, but he thought Kabuto looked... pleased at having a mass of fire coming at him.

There was a sudden puff of smoke and Kabuto vanished just as the fire ball rolled past. Sasuke hadn't bothered to activate his sharingan at the start thinking it would be an easy victory. He shut his eyes and opened them again with it active. He looked about the arena floor and into the air but did not find a sign of him.

Just a second too late he recalled that the sharingan could not see into the earth.

Kabuto leapt out of the arena floor and Sasuke jumped back. He was quick enough to avoid Kabuto's touch but there was a green chakra extending about a foot from each of his hands. One of these sliced into his right shoulder. He felt an instant sharp pain and though his arm had been cut off.

Looking he was relieved to see it was still hanging there from his shoulder. There was no wound he could see no blood, but he could no longer feel his right arm.

"You should resign the match Sasuke," Kabuto said. "My chakra scalpel has severed all the nerves in your shoulder. That arms useless to you now. You won't be able to make any more jutsus and you'll have to fight with one arm."

Sasuke knew that was true, his right arm was just dead weight now. But...

"There's no way I'd ever just give up!" With his left arm he took out a kunai and did the only thing he could. He charged straight in. With no jutsus his only chance was to try and get close and rely on the sharingan and his fighting ability to somehow overwhelm his opponent.

Kabuto grinned and faced him with his chakra blades.

Sasuke's eyes told him where the attacks were coming but it didn't help him. He learned something, that knowing where an attack was coming from did you no good at all if your body was not fast enough and strong enough to react to it. Kabuto neatly and easily hit him in the other shoulder and above both knees. Sasuke toppled to the floor unable to get up or even raise a hand.

"Winner Kabuto," Hayate announced.

Wails rose from both Ino and Sakura.

"I can't believe Sasuke-kun lost!" Sakura said.

"It's a real shame," Kakashi said. "I honestly thought he had a good chance of making it clear to the finals. Still, it's an outstanding accomplishment to get this far on your first try." He nodded to the two of them. "It's up to you two now, do your very best."

Naruto and Sakura both nodded.

Meanwhile Kabuto helped the medic nins by reversing the effects of his chakra blades. After only a few minutes Sasuke was at the railing with his team. Head bowed but otherwise unharmed.

"There's no reason to sulk Sasuke," Kakashi said. "You did very well and I am proud of you."

"You'll definitely make Chunin next time," Sakura said.

Naruto looked over at the depressed boy. "Hey teme."

"What dobe?"

"If you want I'll let you hold my Chunin vest after I win."

"Idiot."

They watched the other matches.

They saw Shino eventually wear down a foreign ninja named Zaku by using his bugs to drain him of his chakra while he dodges the powerful blasts from his arms.

They saw the puppet master Kankuro take down Kabuto's remaining teammate.

And then it was Sakura's turn.

Yamanaka Ino vs. Haruno Sakura

The two girls faced each other. Sakura removed her hitai-ite from about her hair and tied it around her forehead.

Smirking Ino did the same. "Is this supposed to mean you're serious forehead?"

"Yeah Ino I'm serious," Sakura said. "I'm not a kid anymore, I'm a ninja. Let's have a serious fight, ninja to ninja."

"Fine by me," Ino said. "You've never been able to beat me in anything but book reading. You won't beat me now either."

"We'll see."

Hayate signaled. "Begin!"

As Ino dropped back Sakura performed a jutsu.

Ino was caught by surprise as her feet sank into the arena floor up to her knees. "Hey! What is this?!" The floor changed from mud back to solid stoned and Ino was trapped. Try as she might she could not pull free.

Sakura raced up from behind and yanked her head back with a handful of pony tail and put a kunai to her throat. "It's over Ino. Proctor please call the match."

Hayate nodded. "Because Ino has been rendered helpless the winner is Sakura."

Naruto burst into wild cheers as Sasuke and Kakashi and Sasuke both clapped.

Ino stared in disbelief at Sakura. "How the hell did you learn such a powerful earth jutsu?"

"It's not an earth jutsu Ino, it was just a low level genjutsu." Sakura cancelled the effect and Ino found herself standing on the unchanged arena floor. "If you'd bothered to learn how to negate a genjutsu or at least spot one you might have won. Maybe it's time for you to really train at being a ninja before you get killed." She walked away with her head held high.

Up on the railing Asuma bowed his head in shame. "All right, next practice session I am teaching all of you how to dispel a genjutsu."

The fifth match was a beating where Temari routed an outmatched Tenten.

Shikamaru then managed to defeat Kin by forcing her to slam her own head into the arena wall.

"Shikamaru got to the finals? *Shikamaru?!* " Naruto said in disbelief. "I work my but off to be the best while he barely even tries and he manages to win?"

"I wouldn't worry about that Naruto," Kakashi said as he pointed to the screen.

Uzumaki Naruto vs. Inuzuka Kiba

"Great, why'd it have to be Kiba?"

"There a problem?" Kakashi asked.

"I was kind of hoping to fight Neji," Naruto explained. "I actually kind of like Kiba and he's Hinata's teammate."

"You can't let any of that hold you back Naruto." Kakashi said. "We are ninja; we don't allow personal feelings to get in the way of the mission. You need to take this fight seriously and not hold back."

"That's right Naruto!" Sakura said. "You need to go get him!"

"Yeah, of course, heh it's just his tough luck I guess."

"Hey dude," Sasuke said as he was about to leap down.

"What time?"

The Uchiha flashed him a rare smile. "Don't lose."

Naruto grinned back. "Pffft, like that could happen!"

Down on the arena floor Hayate signaled for them to start.

"Kiba, you should concede," Naruto said.

"Don't get all cocky! I'm not Hinata; I won't faint if you get near me!"

Up on the railing Hinata blushed as Kurenai chuckled silently.

Naruto shrugged. "I'll try not to be too rough" he performed hand signs and deliberately called on some extra power. He wanted to impress the old man who was watching. **"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."**

As he cast the jutsus he felt a hot stabbing pain come from his shoulder. He slapped a hand over the curse seal. *Ugh, what the hell was that?*

The arena floor was covered in a thick pall of smoke. He'd been drawing on just a little of the Kyuubi's chakra planning to make two hundred clones. When the smoke cleared though he realized he's made five hundred. They packed the entire arena floor and spilled over to the walls where they used chakra to attach themselves.

The change didn't really matter and it certainly looked impressive to the Hokage and everyone else watching. The clones fell on poor Kiba who had no hope of beating them off. They didn't hit him though. Having him so completely out numbered they settled for simply piling on and holding him down until Naruto could be declared the winner. Everyone assumed the jutsu had worked exactly as he'd intended.

Sasuke and Sakura both cheered loudly as Kakashi clapped. "Looks like I'll be busy getting eh two of you ready for the exams."

As Naruto headed up the stairs he continued to rub his shoulder.

Jiraiya and the Hokage both noticed.

"Damn it, I can't believe it ended that way!" Kiba said angrily.

"I'm sorry Kiba-kun," Hinata said.

"You have nothing to feel sorry about Kiba," Kurenai told him. "You were beaten by a stronger enemy, that is all."

"I'm going to definitely need to get stronger," Kiba muttered.

Up on the screen the next pairing was announced.

Hyuuga Neji vs. Hyuuga Hinata

The moment she saw it Hinata shuddered.

"Hinata, forfeit the match," Kiba said.

"What?"

"Kiba what are you saying?" Kurenai demanded.

"Sensei you know that Neji will be merciless towards her!" He looked at Hinata. "Hinata I believe in you but you're not his equal. If you fight him he really might kill you."

Kurenai frowned. She knew of the hard feelings that lay just beneath the surface in that clan. But the idea Neji would try and go that far...

"It is your choice Hinata; you can fight or not fight. It is entirely up to you."

She looked across the way to where Naruto was waving to her. "Kick his ass Hinata-chan! I believe in you!"

Naruto-kun. "I'll fight." She said.

"Begin!" Hayate said.

Neji activated his byakugan. "Lady Hinata, withdraw from this match."

"Wh... what?"

"I said withdraw from this match," Neji repeated his anger mounting. "You are a complete and utter disgrace to the Hyuuga name. The thought that you are technically the clan heir sickens me."

What did that bastard say? Naruto gripped the iron railing and felt his temperature rise. He normally didn't care what happened to others. But seeing this happen to Hinata was different.

"Wha... what?"

"You should give up on being a ninja entirely and just marry some rich lord and make babies. As a shinobi you are utterly hopeless! You are too kind. You wish for harmony and avoid conflict. You follow others, never even trying to impose your own will. You are completely lacking in every area of a competent ninja!"

"That bastard..." Naruto muttered. Without noticing the iron rail began to twist and bend within his grip.

"And if that's not enough you disgrace yourself by associating with someone who is completely beneath you. Uzumaki Naruto is a worthless pariah and unworthy of even speaking to Hyuuga! That you should actually enjoy his company is disgusting! He..."

"STOP IT!" Hinata screamed at him.

Neji halted his verbal attack, too shocked by her outburst to continue his train of thought.

"Stop saying such horrible things about Naruto-kun! You don't even know him! I have been watching him for a long time and I know his real worth! He's brave and courageous and no matter what he suffers he never gives up! He's the kind of person I've always wanted to be and I wish I could have even half the courage he's always had. Stop saying it's a disgrace for me to be with him! When I'm with him I feel like I can do anything! He makes me believe I can be better than who I am now, that I can change and be more like him!"

"Is that what you believe?" Neji said coldly. "That you can change? Don't delude yourself Hinata, people don't change! We are each born with an unchangeable destiny that as is as set and the stars in the heavens. You are a weakling Hinata, that is all you have ever been, all you will ever be, and all you can ever be! Accept your limitations and stop dreaming of changes that will never happen!"

"Shut up you idiot!" Naruto shouted from the balcony. "What the hell do you know about what people can or can't be?! The only one who can decide that is Hinata herself! If she wants it bad enough I believe she can be anything she wants! People aren't stars you moron! And even if they were didn't anyone ever tell you that stars can sometimes shoot across the sky?! There is no destiny! There is no fate! All destiny is, is an excuse losers like you like to use when they don't get what they want! If you're not happy with what you have then work to change it but don't attack Hinata for it! I believe in her! She's worth a hundred, no a thousand like you any day!" Beneath his grip metal rail snapped and broke.

Naruto-kun. Hinata activated her byakugan and dropped into the juuken fighting stance. "Big brother Neji, let's fight."

He turned from Naruto to face her. He too dropped into the stance. "All right Hinata, I'll show you your destiny."

It was no match. Hinata fought him as hard as she could and landed a few blows. But where her attacks were desperate his were coordinated and perfectly carried out. He shut her chakra points down one after another, slowing her and weakening her.

And damaging her organs.

He delivered a last strike right above her heart. "Failure," he said, his voice ringing with contempt.

Hinata felt her heart stop and blood spurted from her mouth and nose as she pitched forward and fell.

Neji walked away from her without a look back.

"Medics!" Hayate shouted.

Kiba, Kurenai, and Shino rushed to her side and medic nins performed emergency treatment and strapped her to a gurney.

Kurenai sent Neji a murderous look. *He really was trying to kill her!*

"Rather than glaring at me you should worry about getting her treatment."

Kurenai and her team followed the medic nins as they took her to receive emergency surgery.

As Hinata was taken away Neji saw Naruto was down on the arena floor. His blue eyes were staring at him with a monstrous intensity.

"I bet you want to kill me right now don't you?"

"The only reason I don't kill you right now is because the old man is watching and I don't think he would forgive me." Reaching down he put his fingers into a small pool of Hinata's blood. "But I swear on her blood that I *will* kill you Hyuuga Neji. That's your destiny now."

Hospital visit

The three of them were sitting at Ichiraku's talking about what had happened and about what they were facing.

"I can't believe that Gaara kid did that to poor Lee!" Sakura said. "I mean I didn't like him hitting on me, but he didn't deserve what happened to him."

Sasuke nodded. "Kiba wasn't kidding about him being deadly. If Lee's sensei hadn't intervened he probably would have been killed. As it is they say he'll likely never recover enough to be a ninja again."

"Why did he have to take it that far though?" Sakura asked. "He could have won the match without hurting Lee like that."

"Well, at least you know not to expect any sort of mercy from him," Sasuke said. He was a little worried about what would happen if either of his teammates had to face that sociopath. The final would be held in one month's time and the matches were already set. Naruto would face Neji, Gaara would face Kabuto, Shino would face Kankuro, Shikamaru would face Temari, and Sakura would face Dosu. When the five winners were determined they would draw lots to decide who would get a bye and who would face who in the second round.

Having seen what Naruto was capable of he wasn't too worried about him. But he didn't know what Sakura would do.

"Stupid," Naruto muttered as he swirled the contents of his bowl with his chop sticks. For probably the first time ever he had no appetite for ramen.

"What was that?" Sasuke asked.

"I said it was stupid to expect mercy from anyone," Naruto said. "Gaara and Neji fought to the extreme limit and didn't care what they did to their opponents. That's what we have to expect from others and what we have to be willing to do ourselves."

"I'm sure not everyone would fight like that!" Sakura said.

"Oh yeah? The guy Kankuro was fighting was ready to snap his neck to win. Kankuro broke most of his bones in return. Temari was every bit as brutal with Tenten even if her injuries weren't as severe. The other matches didn't turn out as bloody, but that's no guarantee for the finals. You have to expect the worst."

Sakura looked at him worriedly. "Is that how you plan to fight Narutokun?"

"Yeah, I won't hold anything back. Especially not against Neji."

"Naruto," Sakura began nervously. "About what you said to Neji. You didn't really mean it did you?"

"Yeah I did Sakura, I mean every word."

"But..."

"If he wants to take revenge for what was done to someone he cares about he has that right," Sasuke said.

Sakura looked unhappily over at Sasuke. Even after all their time together in the academy and on the same team she still knew very little about him. For instance the, 'certain man' he meant to kill. She had no clue who he might be or what he had done. What she had come to realize though was that he was completely serious about it.

She really didn't like having both her teammates obsessing about revenge. "But what good will come of it? Naruto do you really think Hinata would want you to kill her cousin even after what he did to

her? I mean do you really think killing him will make things any better for you?"

"Of course not," Naruto said bitterly. "I'm sure that my killing one of the high and mighty Hyuuga will only make my life harder. No matter how much he may deserve it the villagers will just see the loser outcast killing one of their precious clan geniuses."

"Then why do you want to kill him?" Sakura asked.

"Because he tried to take away something very precious to me and I can't forgive that."

Sasuke slowly nodded in perfect understanding.

The conversation between them died down after that as they found trouble coming up with things to say.

"What's with this heavy atmosphere?" Kakashi asked as he strolled into the restaurant. "Two of you have made it all the way to the finals while all three of you reached at least the preliminaries of the third stage. You should all be celebrating... especially you since you won't be getting much down time from here on out."

All three students looked at him apprehensively.

"Okay what are you going to do to us now?" Naruto asked.

"I want all three of you to meet me at the gate tomorrow morning at eight sharp. I've just gotten permission from the Hokage to take you to a really desolate spot I know outside the village. For the next month we are going to do some very high level intensive training to get Naruto and Sakura ready for the finals and give them the best possible chance to make Chunin."

"What about me?" Sasuke asked.

"I plan this to be a really brutal training session," Kakashi said with a hidden smile. "I wouldn't want you to miss out on that. Misery does

love company."

"As long as it helps me get stronger," Sasuke said.

"Is there any word on Hinata?" Naruto asked with a low intensity.

"She'd out of surgery now and the doctors have declared her stable."

Naruto tossed some money on the count and got off his stool. "I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Naruto it's way past visiting hours!" Kakashi called after him.

"Like I care!" There was something very important he needed to say to her before he left.

"So you are unconcerned by this situation?" Sarutobi asked.

"What is there to be concerned about?" Hyuuga Hiashi retorted.

"Your daughter was very nearly killed by her own cousin!" Kurenai snapped. "Doesn't that worry you?"

The man turned to her with his cold gaze. "That was the result of her own weakness. If she cannot defeat a member of the cadet branch that only proves her inferiority. The weak are of no concern to the Hyuuga."

"You arrogant, self righteous..."

"Enough Kurenai," Sarutobi said. "You have brought your concerns to Hiashi, you can go now."

"But..."

"Please depart Kurenai; there is nothing more for you to say." *For your own sake do not make an enemy of him.*

"Yes, Hokage-sama," she sent Hiashi a last glance before leaving the Hokage's office.

"Rather emotional isn't she?" Hiashi stated. "Is she really qualified to lead a squad?"

"I feel she is more than qualified," the Hokage said as he calmly lit his pipe. "And since it is my decision to make she shall continue to do so."

"Certainly," Hiashi said politely.

"There is the other matter," Sarutobi said. "I felt it only proper you be made aware of it."

"It does not concern me," Hiashi replied.

"Oh? A threat against Neji's life doesn't concern you?"

"Death is an expected part of any ninja's existence. There are always deaths during these exams, and this year's have proven no exception. A ninja who is afraid of death is of no worth."

"I agree of course that every ninja must make peace with the fact that death can come at any time. However it is a different matter when someone openly seeks it."

"Uzumaki Naruto," Hiashi said slowly. "Neji explained to me the reason behind his anger at my nephew. That my daughter would choose to associate with someone so far beneath her does not speak well of her."

"Naruto is a fine boy and will become an exceptional ninja and leader one day. I have no doubt of it."

"That is your opinion Hokage-sama, but I note it is one that is not shared by many others."

"Others don't truly know him; they only know what lies within him." Sarutobi said. "When I look at Naruto I see an unlimited potential."

Hiashi nodded. "I heard the very same words spoken of Orochimaru and Namikaze Minato. So one must wonder what he will do with this vast potential. In any case I have faith that Neji can handle himself."

Sarutobi puffed on his pipe slowly. "I see... well it's not as if I can expel Naruto simply for making a threat, even if it is against a fellow leaf nin. If I allow a ninja who deliberately kill or attempt to kill I can hardly punish a ninja who simply makes the threat. Tell me Hiashi, *if* Naruto really were to kill him what would you do?"

"Do you really think I would seek vengeance against the boy?"

"No," the Hokage replied. "Yet I would like to hear the actual words."

Hiashi nodded. "I give you word Hokage-sama, I will not seek any type of retribution against Uzumaki Naruto should he kill Neji."

"I am very sorry young man," the old nurse said rigidly. "But visiting hours are over. Please return tomorrow."

"I'm not going to be here tomorrow," Naruto said with mounting frustration. "Please, I just want to see her for a few minutes."

The nurse was giving him a dark and ugly look he was all too familiar with. "That would be impossible."

Naruto slowly clenched his fists. Because Konoha hospital often held sick or wounded ninja it had far more security than most places. If he got caught sneaking into Hinata's room he would definitely get in trouble. *So what? I covered the Hokage Monument in graffiti and didn't get in trouble. I bet the old man will just bring me to his office and lecture me.*

"Screw you," he said and walked past reception towards the elevators.

The old woman turned red and picked up a phone. "I'll have the ANBU arrest you!"

"Now, now, no need for anything so drastic," a friendly voice called.

The nurse looked up. "Oh! Kabuto-san! It's so good to see you! This boy was Just about to..."

"He was wanting to see Hyuuga Hinata wasn't he?" The nurse nodded. "I know it's a bit late but would you mind just looking the other way for a bit? It would mean a lot to me."

"Oh, well, if it's for you, I suppose it would be all right."

"Thank you," Kabuto said with his open smile. "I'll escort him just to make sure there's no trouble. Could you tell me what her room number is?"

"She is in room number 420."

The two of them were riding up the elevator in a strained silence.

"I didn't need any help," Naruto said as the doors opened.

"Well, it's much easier to do something with permission than without. Don't you think?"

"I've never really worried too much about getting permission," Naruto looked up at the taller boy curiously. "How did you manage that by the way? You somebody important?"

"No, but my dad is. He's one of Konoha's chief medical officers. He's trained me as a medic nin and I occasionally work here under his supervision."

"Must be nice having someone important to watch out for you."

Kabuto raised an eyebrow. "Well as far as that goes don't you have the Hokage looking after you?"

"Yeah, I guess I do," Naruto admitted. "Any way, why did you help me just now?"

"Because you seemed to be in need of it, and because I'd like us to be friends?"

"Why?" Naruto demanded. "You know what I am right?"

"I'm not the sort to blame someone for something that wasn't their fault. I've noticed the guts you've shown to get this far even with half the village spitting on you. I admire that kind of courage and I'd like to help you and be a friend."

Naruto didn't trust him. He'd often heard people say things like that to him, only to hurt him as soon as he opened up. And there was just something about this guy that set his teeth on edge.

"You pick a weird time to try and be friends," Naruto said. "Since we're both in the finals we might have to face each other. If that happens will you take a dive to help me along?"

"Of course not" Kabuto said with an easy laugh. "I have my pride as a ninja after all. But maybe there are other things I could help you with." They came to the door marked 420. "Go in and see your friend for as long as you like, I'll wait out here."

Naruto nodded slightly. "Thanks."

Her chest was wrapped in bandages. Her arms were covered in ugly bruises and there was an IV in her left one. A heart monitored gave out a slow and steady; 'beep' as she lay there unconscious and oblivious to the world around her.

Naruto came to the side of her bed and looked down at her sleeping face. Even with being unconscious she looked like she was in pain.

He stood there, just looking at her in silence for about five minutes.

Then he leaned down and whispered in her ear. "You belong to me."

With that he turned around and left her room.

Destiny

"All right gang, I think that's enough," Kakashi announced.

Soundlessly all three of his students dropped to the ground.

The past month had been hell. None of them had ever imagined what sensei could be like when he got truly *serious*. He'd taken them to a desolate spot in the middle of nowhere and proceeded to work them to death. He'd forced them to climb cliff faces and to run with backpacks filled with rocks. He'd spent long grueling sessions sparring with each of them until their bodies were covered in bruises. He'd made them run laps along the roofs of caverns upside down to improve their chakra control.

And he'd also taught them each a jutsu.

Sasuke learned the chidori which was ideal for a sharingan user.

Naruto had been taught rasengan, an advanced jutsu that normally required years to master. Thanks to using hundreds of shadow clones for hours each day he'd managed to master it in just a month.

Sakura had learned a higher level genjutsu from a scroll. Unfortunately Kakashi had never acquired any of a high level and so she had been forced to figure it out mostly on her own.

They had gotten a lot accomplished but it had been a miserable experience.

"All right, the finals are being held the day after tomorrow. We'll return to the village tomorrow morning and you'll be free for the rest of the day. Naruto and Sakura, both of you make sure to spend the day resting."

Kakashi left to start a fire and make the evening meal. All three students remained on their backs looking up into the evening sky.

They were all much too tired to move if they didn't have to.

"Why is our sensei so worthless most of the time and then a monster the rest of the time?" Naruto complained wearily. "Couldn't we have a normal teacher like everyone else?"

"Haven't you heard dobe?" Sasuke asked with a slight grin. "We're special."

"Lucky us," Naruto said sourly.

Sakura laughed softly. There was something strangely comforting in listening to the two of them bicker. It was like a sign that things were okay, that they were normal. "What an amazing view," she said. "You never see the stars like this back in the village."

"You can from the top of the Hokage Monument," Naruto said. "It's just like this on a clear night it's like you could reach out and touch them."

"Yes," Sakura agreed. "You know, this may sound dumb, but right now I'm really glad I'm here."

"You're right Sakura-chan," Naruto teased. "That does sound dumb."

"I mean it! Even though it's been hard, getting to do this with the both of you and with sensei it... it makes me really happy! I feel a special bond with the two of you!"

"Shared hardships will always build camaraderie," Sasuke said quietly. "I used to listen to some of the elders in my clan talk. For them their teammates were every bit as important as family."

Naruto gave that some thought. "Do you think that's true? Do you think teammates can be that close?"

"I do," Sakura said. "Ino would complain all the time about how close her father was with his two teammates even after so many years. I definitely think we can become that close to each other."

Sasuke was staring up into the heavens. "I... I want that," he said. "I want us to have those bonds, and for us to care about each other."

Naruto looked at the other boy and grinned. "Oh yeah? What happened to the emo loner who has to, 'kill a certain man?'"

"That hadn't changed," Sasuke said. "I'm still going to get powerful, I'm still going to kill him, and I'm still going to restore my clan. But I don't want to do it alone anymore. In fact, I've come to realize that trying to do it alone would only make it harder and take more time."

"Yeah, it is kind of good to have people you can trust," Naruto said. "I just wish..."

"What?" Sasuke asked.

That I'd had this sooner, back when it still mattered. "Nothing," he said with a sheepish grin.

For team seven the last night of the training session was a good one.

Late the next morning they returned to the village. Kakashi reminded Naruto and Sakura of the time they would need to report to the stadium. To Sasuke he extended an invitation to attend with him.

They then went their separate ways.

Hinata was sitting alone on a swing in the park. For the past month she had been coming here to the park to do a little light workout on her own. Since Shino was the only one on their squad in the finals Kurenai-sensei had been concentrating on training him. Kiba was also getting some special training from his mom and others in his clan. That left Hinata pretty much on her own.

She had not received any visits from her father while in the hospital. Actually none of her family had bothered to come see her for the

week she was there. She had gotten visits from her teammates and sensei; they had also been the only ones to provide her with flowers.

She was glad for that. It had made her happy to see sensei and Kiba-kun and Shino-kun cared. But she had wanted one person in particular to come and see her. Sensei had told her that Naruto and his team had left the village for some special training. So she understood why he hadn't come to see her.

She swung slowly back and forth. She had no reason to be here, the doctor had warned her against strenuous exercise. And with her team unavailable all she could really do was some running and exercises anyway. She was here in the park wasting time because she didn't want to go home. Following her defeat her father wanted nothing to do with her. The other members of the clan were careful to follow his lead and so they were also cool to her, though never impolite. Hanabi was determined to supplant her as heir and treated her more as a rival than as a sister. And Neji... Neji was cruel. He never said a single word that was out of line or by itself hateful. Instead he belittled her with false words of concern and advice such as her retiring from her shinobi duties. He made it unmistakably plain that whatever their status he saw her as beneath him. For her home was the last place she wanted to go.

What she wanted was to be with Naruto. She imagined going to live with him in his apartment. She thought about how wonderful it would be to be someplace she actually felt welcomed. All she wanted was to be near him, to see that smile of his and hear the sound of his voice.

As she was daydreaming a pair of arms wrapped around her.

"What?!" Instinctively she stiffened and looked about in panic.

"Hinata-chan," Naruto said in relief. "I've missed you!"

"Naruto-kun! When did you get back?"

"Just a little while ago, I've been looking for you since then." Taking a deep breath he let go of her and held out a bunch of different flowers. "Here, these are for you Hinata-chan, I know their nothing special. I picked them along the way. I just wanted to give you some flowers."

Flashback

"Hey Sakura-chan," Naruto called as they were racing back to the village. "I need some advice."

"About what?"

"Ah, well, I wanted to get Hinata some flowers. What do you think I should get?"

Sakura flashed him a wide grin. "Just pick her some in the woods and give them to her, I guarantee she'll love them."

"I can't do that! She's a princess! If I just get some from the forest it'll look like I'm cheap!"

Sakura laughed and easily shook her head. "If you were trying to ask her out on a first date or if you were just meeting her I'd agree. But she's had a crush on you for four years Naruto-kun. What she wants isn't to have you spend money on her. All she really wants is your attention and your time. Just tell her you picked the flowers yourself and they'll be more precious to her than a dozen roses."

"Really?"

"Absolutely! When a girl is in love all she wants is for the boy to make a real effort for her." She looked over at Sasuke dreamily.

"They're lovely Naruto-kun! I'll treasure them!"

Hmmm, I guess Sakura was right. "I'm really sorry I haven't been able to see you before this."

"Oh I understand Naruto-kun! I'm just glad you're here now!"

A bit embarrassed he rubbed the back of his head. "Well you are my girl so of course I came as soon as I could."

Her face took on a deep blush. "I... I am?"

He put his arms around her and hugged her tight. "You are," he told her. "You are my girlfriend Hinata-chan, you belong to me now."

You belong to me. Those words thrilled her. They made her heart race. The feeling of him holding her so possessively made her happy. "Yes," she said. "I belong to you Naruto-kun."

With her head pressed against his chest she could not see the cold smile that came to his face when she said that.

"Hinata-chan have you eaten lunch yet?"

"No," she replied.

"Then let's go get something."

Walking along the street hand in hand Naruto had loved the expressions he'd spotted on people's faces. Most of them seemed not to know whether to scowl or smile politely when they saw the Kyuubi walking with the Hyuuga princess. He wanted very much to laugh in their faces but restrained himself. He kept his attention focused on her. He asked her about her recovery and the training she had been doing. He asked her about her family too and got a few details.

"Neji really doesn't know when to stop pushing his luck," Naruto growled over a bowl of miso ramen.

"Naruto-kun," she spoke over a bowl of shrimp ramen. "Is it true you swore to kill him? That you swore an oath on my blood?"

"Yeah it is, when I saw what he did to you I knew there was no way I could let him live."

She looked down to hide the fresh blush on her face. She had always been ignored and made to feel completely unimportant. The idea that the boy she cared for would be ready to go this far just for her made her feel like a princess in a story.

"Naruto-kun, I... I really appreciate that you feel that way. But no matter how he's treated me Neji is still my cousin. Please don't hurt him."

Naruto reached over and took one of her hands into his. He could feel her pulse racing. "You're very sweet and very forgiving Hinata-chan, and that's one of the things I like about you. But I swore an oath; I won't go back on my word even for you."

"But... but..."

Seeing her becoming upset he decided he had to say something to comfort her a little. *She's sweet but she needs to be a little tougher if she's going to be my woman.* "If Neji doesn't show up tomorrow I'll delay fulfilling my promise. That's as much as I can do."

"I... I don't think Neji will do that no matter what I say."

"Then he'll have to accept his destiny, he's good at that right?" Hinata looked unhappy. "Cousin or not this guy doesn't deserve your mercy."

"I know, but I still don't want him to be hurt. I really believe we can be close one day."

Silly girl, people aren't that forgiving. He is your enemy now and always. "I'm sorry Hinata, but if I face him tomorrow I will kill him. Will

you want to stop seeing me?"

She shook her head. "No Naruto-kun I... I lo... love you, and I want to be with you no matter what!"

He smiled at her. "I love you too Hinata-chan." He leaned over and places chaste kiss on her cheek.

She turned a deeper red and began to tremble.

A second hook was now in place.

The stadium was packed and the crowd was buzzing with excitement as the candidate waited down on the field.

"Did you have a good journey Lord Kazekage?" Sarutobi asked as his guest took the seat beside him.

"Oh not too bad," the Kazekage replied. "I must say I am looking forward to the matches."

The third nodded. "Yes, this should be a very memorable day for all involved."

Behind his veil the Kazekage chuckled. "Of that I have no doubt at all."

"Hey! We're one short!" Naruto said. He counted again and only came up with nine.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru muttered. "Didn't you hear? That Dosu guy disappeared a few days ago."

"He did?" Sakura asked. "But I was supposed to fight him! What happens now?"

"You will have a bye for the opening round," Genma the acting proctor informed her. "You will then face the winner of the match between Temari and Shikamaru. The rules for this round are the same as for the preliminaries; you will all fight a series of one to one matches until we have a final winner. Keep in mind that to be promoted to Chunin you do not have to win the tournament; you don't even necessarily have to win a match. Promotion is decided by the scores from a series of judges, impress them with your skills and you'll earn yourself a vest. As in the preliminaries a match ends when someone is dead, unconscious, yields, or if I declare they cannot continue. I will try to prevent any unnecessary slaughter but don't count on my intervention. Surrender the moment you feel you are defeated. Now the first match will be between Gaara and Kabuto. The two of you remain here, the rest of you please go to the observation deck."

"Actually sir," Kabuto raised his hand. "I'd like to forfeit."

All eyes went to the silver haired teen. Gaara's eyes were especially hostile.

"What did you say?" Genma demanded.

"I'd like to forfeit," Kabuto repeated. "After seeing what my opponent is capable of I'm afraid I'd have no chance against him. I'm sorry."

"If that was how you felt you might have mentioned this a little sooner and allowed us time to reshuffle the matches."

"Sorry," Kabuto put his head down.

What a way to start! That Gaara kid looks ready to commit murder too. With no choice Genma took a deep breath. "Kabuto has chosen to forfeit the opening match; the winner is Gaara of the Sand."

Not surprisingly a loud series of boos rained down. The crowd was not only upset at being denied its entertainment and having its bets

made void it didn't appreciate the shameful sight of a leaf ninja walking away without even trying to fight.

"I see the crowd does not like such a blatant show of cowardice," the Kazekage mentioned. "Though given his opponent I can well understand it."

The Hokage frowned; he was more than a little embarrassed. "I am sure the other ninja of my village will prove more courageous."

"Let us hope so, otherwise this will be a frightfully short event."

Genma looked over at Naruto and Neji. "Do you two feel like fighting?"

"Certainly," Neji announced.

"Wouldn't miss it," Naruto said.

Genma nodded in relief. "All right the rest of you get tot eh observation deck."

"Good luck Naruto-kun!" Sakura said as she left.

"I think you should know that unless you forfeit you're going to die," Naruto said. "Actually you're going to die no matter what you do, but if you quit you'll live awhile longer."

"Is that supposed to scare me?" Neji asked with a smirk. "Hinata pleaded with me all night and this morning to forfeit. She claimed she was trying to protect me, but the truth is obvious. You convinced her to beg me didn't you? You realize you have no chance of defeating me and getting me to yield is your only hope."

Naruto began to snort and then laugh. "Is *that* what you think? Here's news flash Neji, the last thing I wanted was for you to forfeit.

The *only* reason I even suggested it is because Hinata really is trying to protect you."

"If you think I'm the one in danger here you really are either deluded or just a fool. Each and every one of us has a fate that was decided the moment we were born. It's a destiny that cannot be averted whatever we do."

"That's fine," Naruto said. "Keep spewing all that crap about destiny and fate. I already told you what your fate was."

"There is no way a low born piece of garbage like you could ever hope to defeat one like me. You have about as much chance of that as you do of really being Hokage one day."

Naruto smiled. "Finally something we can both agree on."

" *If* you two have had enough let's start this match," Genma said and brought his hand down. "Begin!"

Neji activated his byakugan and dropped into a jyuken fighting stance.

Meanwhile Naruto performed a jutsu pouring a lot of chakra into it. As he did so he grimaced in pain, the mark at the base of his neck was throbbing.

The arena floor was momentarily hidden by smoke. As the smoke cleared a hundred clones appeared and had Neji surrounded. A single Naruto, presumably the original was standing about a hundred yards away.

Neji looked at the clones with his byakugan. With his blood limit active he was able to note that chakra within each clone. He was a bit surprised at what he was seeing. At the preliminaries he had observed the kage bunshins Naruto had created to defeat Kiba. Those had all had an equal amount of chakra pulsing through an artificial chakra system. These clones however were different. They

lacked a chakra system and instead had a significant amount of chakra stored in their chest cavities.

As the clones began closing in on him he smiled. Even if these were slightly altered he could easily handle them. "Your kage bunshins are no match for me loser! No matter how many you make!"

As one came in striking distance he hit its shoulder with his palm. The instant he struck the clone exploded.

Boom!

Neji was thrown to the ground and screamed. Where his right hand had been there was now nothing but a burned stump. As he was down the other clones all piled on and grabbed a hold of him to make sure he could not get away.

"Hey Neji," the original Naruto called out. "Whoever said they were kage bunshins? These are bakuhatsuteki bunshins."

"Exploding clones?!" Gai shouted and turned to Kakashi. "You taught your student a forbidden technique?"

"I didn't teach him that," Kakashi said. *Naruto, where on earth did you learn that jutsu?*

Up in his seat the Kazekage leaned forward. Now this was proving interesting!

In the stands Hinata and Kiba watched. Hinata closed her eyes knowing what was about to happen. *I'm sorry Neji.*

With a hundred clones holding him down and only one hand there was nothing Neji could do.

"Guess it's time for you to meet your destiny," Naruto said. With one hand he waved while wearing a big smile. "Bye, bye."

KABOOM!!

The entire stadium shook as the equivalent of a thousand explosive detonated. People covered up as dirt and bits of material rained down on them throughout the stands. When the explosion and smoke died away there was a crater twenty feet across and fifteen feet deep left scorched into the earth.

The crowd stared down in stunned silence. They could hear the foot falls as Naruto was already walking away to join the other candidates. They were too stunned, and too frightened to make a sound.

Walking away he refused to look up at the crowd or acknowledge them in any way. For him their silence was a second victory. He knew they would never love him, but maybe now they would finally start to fear him.

"Magnificent," the Kazekage whispered. He was actually trembling with excitement. He looked over to the Hokage with a smile hidden beneath his veil. "I had no idea you leaf nin could be so ruthless! I heartily applaud."

"This was not what I had hoped to see," Sarutobi said. *Naruto this is not the way of the leaf, we don't kill our own for revenge.* He had hoped Naruto would not actually choose to do it, that at the last moment he would choose mercy. But the boy had killed, and done so ruthlessly. For the first time Sarutobi began to seriously question just what was in the boy's heart. *I will need to speak to him as soon as the exams are over.*

"You know, I think I really want to see Naruto and Gaara fight," the Kazekage said. "I think that would be quite interesting."

I am the Kyuubi

"Bye, bye."

Kaboom!

Along with everyone else Hiashi watched as a massive explosion engulfed the stadium and shook its very foundations. He could do no more than watch as the smoke cleared to reveal nothing but a blackened crater and a victorious Uzumaki Naruto walking away with his head held high.

His nephew, the genius and pride of the Hyuuga, was gone. Though his nephew had held hard feelings towards him and the main branch he had always hoped to one day tell him the truth and reconcile their differences. In his pocket was a message his dear brother had written just prior to his death. He'd brought it with him on the off chance the opportunity to present it to Neji might come up. He'd spent all these years waiting for a moment when his nephew might be willing to hear the truth and believe it.

He took out the letter, the last thing his brother had ever written. And slowly ripped it to shreds.

"Father... what happened?" Hanabi asked. She was staring uncertainly out at the smoking ground below.

He looked at his youngest daughter with cool disdain, his own anguish well hidden. "Why do you ask such a ridiculous question when the answer is obvious? Neji is dead, his opponent was stronger and this is the result."

"But... but did he have to die?" The little girl was clearly shaken. Of course she had been taught from the cradle that shinobi had to be ready to embrace death at any moment. It was something she thought she understood. But this was the very first time she had ever

seen anyone die, and it was very different when it was someone you knew and saw regularly.

"For a ninja defeat often means death," Hiashi said coldly. "Learn this lesson well Hanabi, we struggle to grow strong because in strength alone can we find safety. Burn this moment into your memory, Neji was strong, but he was still beaten. His death was caused by that failure." He came to his feet. "Come Hanabi, I have no further interest in these exams."

"What about the boy who killed Neji?" Hanabi asked. "What will happen to him?"

"Nothing," Hiashi replied. "His actions may have been cruel but they broke no laws. And we Hyuuga do not stoop to petty vengeance." *Though I will not forget this.*

"He's powerful," Gaara whispered.

Kankuro and Temari were looking at him nervously and slowly backing away from him. It was always a bad sign when he started talking to himself.

As if suddenly noticing them Gaara looked up at his two siblings. "I don't want to wait, Kankuro, Temari, forfeit your matches."

"Sure Gaara, whatever you say!" *That's fine, these matches are irrelevant anyway.*

Temari nodded. "Yes, of course," *It's too bad; I would have liked to have fought.* The thought of arguing with Gaara never crossed her mind.

In the stands Tenten began to cry.

"Kakashi! What was that?!" A furious Maito Gai shouted. "I know that you were a top assassin of the black ops, but that exactly have you been teaching your students? That was nothing less than murder!"

"Careful what you say!" Sasuke got up to his feet. "I didn't hear you get so righteous when Neji tried killing someone else's student!"

"Do not speak to Gai-sensei like that!" Though on crutches Lee looked ready to fight. "Neji did not deserve what happened to him."

"Neither did Hinata," Sasuke shot back.

"That's enough Sasuke," Kakashi said and put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "As for you Gai, I'm sorry for what happened to your student. But even if this is a tournament the combat is real, we all understand the risks we have to take when we fight."

"Is that your excuse Kakashi?" Gai demanded. "What we witnessed just now had nothing to do with fighting. It was an assassination."

"Actually it wasn't, and I can say that as an expert on the subject. When you assassinate you don't give your target a month's warning and then face them head on in a fair fight. While I don't agree with what Naruto did just now it was within the rules and spirit of the exams."

"Do you truly believe that Kakashi or are you just trying to protect your student?"

"Does it make a difference Gai?"

"I had thought better of you my eternal rival."

"I don't think I'm acting any differently than you," Kakashi answered. "Right or wrong Naruto is my student and I'll do whatever I have to, to protect him."

Despite the destruction to the field there was still plenty of room to fight. Genma called for the next match. "Kankuro, Shino, please come here."

"Actually," Kankuro called out. "I wish to forfeit."

Temari immediately raised her hand. "I wish to forfeit my match as well."

Hearing this the stunned crowd finally came out of its haze and began to boo loudly. On the observation deck Shino had a slight scowl while Sakura looked unhappy as well.

"Fine by me," Shikamaru said. "I didn't want to fight a girl anyway."

"Idiot! You're going to have to fight me!" Sakura told him.

"Troublesome," he muttered.

The Sandaime turned to his guest in open puzzlement. "Your children are showing a surprising lack of resolve, especially given the fact that you are here to bear witness."

The Kazekage sighed dramatically. "Very true Lord Hokage, it is rather embarrassing. I suspect they fear running up against that Naruto, he is rather intimidating."

"That would not explain why they would forfeit *now*. Even if they forfeited later to avoid facing Naruto they still might have earned promotion."

"It seems my children are not too concerned with becoming Chunin."

Then why did they enter this exam in the first place? The Hokage wondered.

"On the bright side we will get to see Naruto and Gaara fight all the sooner."

What the hell is going on here? Genma thought furiously. Forfeiting before a finals match wasn't completely unheard of but it was damn rare. And it never happened during the opening round matches, it happened later when a ninja was beat or out of chakra and knew he couldn't fight again. Having *three* forfeits in the opening round was unbelievable.

"All right then, Shikamaru and Sakura..."

"No!" Gaara shouted. "I don't want to wait." He made a hand sign and disappeared in a swirl of wind and sand.

Kankuro leaned over to his sister and whispered in her ear. "Let's go find Baki." She quickly nodded her agreement and the two of them left.

When Gaara materialized on the ground Genma looked over at him with a frown. "I haven't called you down yet; your opponent has already fought one match. You'll need to wait until Sakura and Shikamaru fight."

"No," Gaara said. "I'm sick of waiting. I want to prove my existence, I want blood." Naruto had just gotten to the exit and had stopped to see what was happening. "If you're not afraid fight me now Uzumaki Naruto."

Naruto shrugged and headed back to where the two of them were. "That's fine by me, just gets you out of the way sooner." He had seen everyone else who was left fight. He was sure he would have a cake walk with whoever he had to face after this. Gaara was the only real competition. "I should warn you though I'm going to win this tournament no matter what it takes."

"I could care less about this tournament, that's not what interests me. I want to kill you and prove my own existence."

"Really? Then I guess I'll have to kill you first then," Naruto replied with a cheery smile.

"Hold on a minute!" Genma said. "Your match is not up yet! And I'd like to remind you both that the goal here is just to win, not to kill your opponent." Even as he said that the cork in Gaara's large gourd popped out and sand began to spill out and pool around his feet. The sand began to swirl and flow about like a living thing. Naruto meanwhile was approaching with a serious look in his eyes. *Well this is great! I can't make the matches I want take place and I can't force the matches I don't want not to. And if that's not enough these two both look to be out for blood.*

"Naruto, if you want time to rest I'll allow it," Genma said.

"I'm fine," he said. "Let's begin."

Looking at their faces it was obvious they were going to fight with or without his sanction. "Damn it, all right then," he lifted his hand over his head and brought it down. "Begin."

Gaara stood where he was, just as with his fight with Lee he disdained to even move.

Naruto leapt back and formed handsigns, this shoulder aching as he drew out a large amount of chakra. **"Bakuhatsuteki Bunshin no Jutsu."**

As before the stadium field was filled with smoke. When it cleared there were a hundred clones in a circle around Gaara, with a single Naruto a safe distance away.

"That won't work on me," Gaara said dismissively.

The sand at his feet began to fire off in small shots in all directions. The small bolts of sand punched through the bunshins detonating them, and then detonating all the others caught in the blast range. Boom, boom, boom, one after another in a rapid series of explosions

the baku hatsuteki bunshins blew up, each with the force of ten explosive notes. A few of the blasts came close to Gaara; the sand formed a protective sphere around him.

When the last explosion faded away the sand fell into a pile around his feet again. Gaara stood there still untouched. "Is that all you have?"

Naruto smiled. "Not even close," he began working a different set of hand signs. "**Kaze Sabeta no Jutsu.**" He felt the throbbing pain and the seal seemed to be burning into his skin. He ignored it and focused on the jutsu. Before him the air solidified into fifty unseen blades. He sent them all for Gaara intending to chop him up into dog meat.

Gaara could not have seen the blades coming. Yet as they reached him the sand became a wall stretching ten feet into the air and fifteen feet across. Naruto knew his blades could cut through wood and even stone with ease. A wall of sand should have been no match. Yet each wind blade shattered against the wall and vanished. The wall had to have the strength of tempered steel at least.

When the last blade was gone the wall dissolved back into a mound at Gaara's feet.

"My turn now," Gaara said.

"Huh?" Naruto was caught by surprise as he felt something tug at his feet. He saw sand already up to his ankles quickly covering his body. "How the hell?" he'd kept a careful eye on Gaara's sand and was a hundred yards away.

"I am Gaara of the desert," he said in that same ghastly voice. "For me making sand is child's play so long as I have minerals to work with. And that includes the earth beneath your feet." He reached out and made a gesture as though he were grabbing something. "**Suna Reikyu.**" The sand completely covered his enemy.

"Oh no! Naruto-kun!" Hinata gasped.

"Kakashi! He's going to!" Sasuke was on his feet ready to leap out of the stands.

"I'm sorry Sasuke but we can't interfere," Kakashi said and grabbed a hold of him.

Sarutobi looked on fearfully, afraid of what was about to happen.

The Kazekage was at the edge of his seat. The moment Naruto was killed he would launch, 'Operation Destroy Konoha.'

"Now you die," Gaara said and made a fist. **"Kibaku Suna Tomurai!"** The sand imploded and Gaara waited for the blood to burst out in a magnificent fountain.

But no blood came.

Instead Gaara began to feel... power. Power and an immense amount of hate and killer intent.

"Is that all you have?" An inhuman voice mocked from within the compacted sand.

With that the sand exploded.

Once it was clear everyone got a clear view of Naruto. His body was surrounded by red chakra.

And the chakra had **five** tails connected to it.

Naruto did not look human. Along with red eyes and claws and fangs, his snout had been pushed out giving him a bestial appearance. His hair was no longer blond but red and covered him completely including his face and arms. Upon his fur could be seen a

series of black lines extending out from a spot on his neck and shoulder. He seemed a perfect monster.

Just the sight of him was enough to send the civilians in the stadium into a mass panic. As they struggled to get away Sound ninja hidden in their midst were trying to decide whether to remain in the stadium or follow the crowd out. The signal had yet to be given and so they could not reveal themselves.

The ninja in the crowd could all sense Naruto's chakra, both its immensity and the evil taint it carried. All of them waited for orders from their Hokage.

The Hokage was on his feet, every bit as horrified as the others seeing this.

Three ANBU in black cloaks appeared before him. "Lord Hokage! What are your orders? We have four squads of ANBU standing ready as well as all the ninja in attendance. Shall we attack him?"

It wasn't what Sarutobi wanted, but what choice was there?

The Kazekage was also on his feet. "Lord Hokage, the match is not over yet."

"You want it to continue?" Sarutobi said in disbelief. "Gaara will not survive!"

"Please allow it to continue Lord Hokage; I give you my word I will not take offence should Gaara be killed."

What kind of father is he? Sarutobi looked at the arena floor. If this was not handled correctly the entire village might just pay for it. He turned to his ANBU. "Remain on standby for now, but be ready to follow me the instant I act."

Gaara stood there feeling overwhelmed by the power and the killer intent being focused on him. He was... afraid. "Wha... what are you?"

Naruto stretched out a clawed palm and began to concentrate red chakra into a sphere. He felt great! Despite the physical changes and all the raw energy coursing through his body he was completely in control. All this vast power was his to do with as he pleased.

He felt like a god.

" I am the Kyuubi!" He shouted out for all the world to hear.

"Wha... what did he say?" A dazed Hinata asked.

Kiba was pale, poor Akamaru was already in his shirt whimpering and shaking. "He said he was the Kyuubi."

"The Kyuubi?" Sasuke said in disbelief. "What is that dobe talking about?"

"I will explain later," Kakashi said. "If we survive this."

"The Kyuubi," Sakura whispered. "But... but he's just Naruto!"

"Given what we are witnessing that would no longer seem to be the case," Shino said.

Shikamaru turned to her. "You can feel his chakra just like I can. Whatever he is he's definitely not, 'just' Naruto anymore."

"No, no, no, I won't let you kill me!" Gaara screamed. The sand swirled and covered his body. "I won't let you end my existence!" He too took on the appearance of a monster, a human sized creature

with huge arms and a single tail made of sand. Gaara was in a panic and not thinking straight. A full transformation was beyond him for the moment. Instead he screamed and ran towards Naruto in this form. "I'll kill you!"

A dark rasengan fully formed Naruto barked a laugh. **"You think you can kill me? Come and try!"**

He raced at Gaara, the two monsters charging at each other both wanting death.

They both struck. Gaara sent a huge claw that was stronger than steel at Naruto's head. The sand shattered and broke as it hit his red chakra cloak.

Laughing Naruto plunged his rasengan straight at Gaara's heart. The sand body hissed as it gave way. The sound changed to a wet, 'smack' when he reached flesh. Gaara gave a short sharp cry of surprise mixed with fear and pain. His blood poured out of the perfectly circular hole that had just been bored through his chest.

The sand shivered and slipped off as Gaara's lifeless body fell.

Naruto stood over the corpse and grinned down. *Too easy! I really am the Kyuubi! No one can beat me!*

"Naruto!" The Hokage called.

He looked up to see he was now surrounded by leaf ninja; there were at least a hundred of them. And from each and every one he could smell fear.

"Naruto," the Hokage said again. "The match is over please release the chakra you have and return to your normal form."

He's scared of me too! Naruto realized. That wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to earn the old man's respect, not make him afraid. That

was for everyone else. **"Sure old man, whatever you say."**

To the vast relief of all present the chakra cloak shrank and disappeared. The red fur melted back to skin and his face once more became human. Last of all the black lines faded and vanished except for the original mark at the base of his neck.

Sarutobi nodded and took a deep breath. "Naruto please come with me, I want to bring you to Jiraiya so he can examine you."

"But what about the exams? They're not over yet!"

Among the crowd surrounding him were the three remaining candidates.

Shino raised his hand. "I forfeit."

"I forfeit," Shikamaru announced.

"I forfeit too," Sakura said.

"It seems the exams are over, now please come with me Naruto." Sarutobi said.

I did it! I won! With a happy smile he fell in beside the Hokage. "Sure thing old man!" Despite being very clever at times he had no idea just how much trouble he was now in.

Alone now in the Hokage's box the Kazekage rose to his feet and applauded. "Ku, ku, ku wonderful Naruto-kun! With you at my side nothing would be impossible." He looked at his two guards. "We are leaving now. We shall return to the hotel."

"The hotel lord?" One of the guards answered in surprise. "But what of the... operation?"

The Kazekage laughed. "The operation is hereby aborted, unless you want to face Naruto-kun down there without the help of our own

jinchuuriki?"

Not surprisingly the two guards quickly shook their heads.

The Kazekage looked at one of them. "You go and talk to our friends outside the wall. It would be embarrassing if they did something even without a signal."

The guard disappeared.

The Kazekage looked back down at the stadium field. *I would have loved to have taught you a lesson old man. But Naruto-kun is more important than anything else now.*

Consequences

The door to the room opened. Naruto watched in silence as the Third Hokage and Jiraiya entered. The Sannin had conducted a thorough examination on him and his seals in this same room and had then left without saying a word. That had been more than two hours ago.

Before the Hokage could speak Naruto beat him to it.

"Why am I a prisoner?" He asked in clip tones, trying very hard not to shout.

Apparently his efforts weren't completely successful. "Watch the attitude kid!" Jiraiya said sharply. "You have no idea how much the old man has gone through just to protect you!"

"Protect me? Protect me from what?!" Naruto demanded.

Sarutobi put a restraining hand on his pupil's arm. "You are not a prisoner Naruto." Sarutobi spoke calmly.

"Then why is there a squad of ANBU at the door? Why did they tell me I wasn't allowed to leave here until you returned? Why am I here in ANBU headquarters to begin with?"

"All of that was simply a precaution for your own safety." The Hokage replied wearily. He pulled out a chair and sat down. He really was an old man, much too old to be Hokage to tell the truth. He could feel all of his years, every one of them. He wanted to retire and lay his burden down. But he couldn't do that until he had someone he could trust to replace him.

He looked over at Jiraiya.

Naruto was fuming at what he saw as his ill treatment. "Why do I need protection? I just won the Chunin exams! I should be out celebrating and showing off my brand new vest!"

"You're an idiot!" Jiraiya shouted at him. *Damn it Minato is this really your kid?! How did the apple fall so damn far from the tree?* "You really have no clue the sort of trouble you're in do you? Well let me spell it out for you! Most of the village wants you dead!"

"So? What else is new?"

Jiraiya stopped, the blasé attitude catching him totally off guard. *Geez, what kind of childhood did this kid have? He really takes the village hating him this much for granted?*

"This is different Naruto," the weary Hokage replied. "Not only are most of the civilians calling for your head, but many of my ninja, even most of the clan heads are now demanding it."

"Do you understand what you did today?" Jiraiya asked. "You openly proclaimed that you were the Kyuubi and promptly used five tails worth of its power. We had dignitaries and nobles from every country that hires ninja in the stands. The whole damn world is going to know who you are inside of a month!"

"Good!" He snapped. "Let them all know who I am. It's not like keeping it a secret ever did me any good! Maybe now I'll finally get some respect."

"Is *that* what you're worried about? Getting respect? Listen kid that's the very last thing you need to be thinking about! A lot of the older ninja in this village faced the Kyuubi twelve years ago, and most of them lost friends and loved ones. Even with the Hokage's protection some of them might just come after you. They would see it as a sacred duty to kill you before you can regain the Kyuubi's full power." Jiraiya told him. "I am not even going to mention the little fact that you killed one of our most promising young ninja and the son of the Kazekage. Count yourself fortunate that Hiashi and the Kazekage both accepted those deaths or you would be in even more trouble."

"And why should I get in trouble for killing them?" Naruto demanded. "Isn't it a law that the candidates can't be punished for anything that

occurs during the exams? Did Neji get in any kind of trouble for almost killing Hinata? Kiba told me Gaara slaughtered three rain ninja even though they were helpless. Was he punished for that?"

"Whatever they did Naruto they did not mercilessly kill before the eyes of the village and the entire world." Sarutobi said. "But you are correct, your actions broke no law and so you will not be punished for them."

"Everything else you did is more than enough," Jiraiya said.

"And just what did I do that was so wrong?" Naruto asked. "'Be powerful.' 'Get stronger.' Isn't that the message we get from the second we enter the academy? Wasn't the whole point of the exams to separate the strong from the weak? How many of those lords who saw me today will want to hire me? How much stronger is the village's reputation going to be now that everyone knows who I am?" He looked at the Hokage with a wide smile. "You don't need to worry old man. When I'm Hokage I'll make this village super powerful! And I'll give the people justice too! The justice they all deserve!"

The words and the look in his eyes sent a chill through Sarutobi's heart.

Flashback

Orochimaru smiled at him. "You have no reason to be concerned Sarutobi-sensei. I promise you I will make this village the mightiest the world has ever seen and give the people true justice and order."

"Naruto, when you say justice I can only hear, 'revenge.'" Sarutobi said.

Naruto's smile stayed as it was but his eyes darkened. "Isn't the difference between, 'justice' and 'revenge' just a point of view? I *know* what the people are guilty of." He was sick of being treated like

he was guilty of something. He was sick of being denied the same treatment everyone else got. And most of all he was sick of being in this room!

Without thought he reached up and rubbed his shoulder.

"Is that seal bothering you kid?" Jiraiya asked.

"No," Naruto lied and dropped his hand to his side.

Looking at the boy Sarutobi could feel his heart sinking. All the illusions that had comforted him were being stripped away. *Was he always like this?* The Hokage wondered. He was sure that had not always been the case. He was absolutely certain the boy had possessed an open heart for most of the time he'd known him. *When did it change? Could I have prevented it?* Despite his best efforts he knew Naruto had been unfairly treated by the people of his village. But even a Hokage was not a kami; there were limits as to how far even he could protect him. And as Hokage he had to do what was best for the village, not what was best for any single individual.

Even when that was unjust.

"Hey old man, since I won the Chunin exams when do I get my vest?"

Sarutobi looked directly at him. "You won't be getting a vest Naruto."

"What?" Naruto said. "But... but I won! I was the last one standing! I was the only one to even win a match at the finals!"

"All of that is very true Naruto." The Hokage said. "But even so I will not promote you."

Naruto felt his heart begin to break. In his whole life the old man was the only one who had ever cared about him. The only person who had ever truly mattered to him, and the only one he had ever wanted to please. His main goal throughout the exams had always been to

impress the old man and make him proud. To hear those words now was a betrayal of everything he had believed in.

"Ho... how can yo... you say that? I di... did what I was supposed to, I won. How can you deny me what I've *earned*?"

"Naruto, becoming a Chunin is about more than raw power and the ability to kill. The Chunin are the mission leaders of the village. They are entrusted not only with the responsibility for carrying out dangerous missions but for looking out for the welfare of their teams. They are leaders." Sarutobi said. "What I saw today has convinced me you are not fit to be Chunin even with your level of raw power. You proved yourself to be utterly reckless, you had no concerns for the consequences of your actions and cared only about the end result and how you would be affected. Did it even enter your mind how killing your opponents could weaken and harm the village? Before you unleashed the Kyuubi's might and proclaimed yourself did you stop to consider the panic you might cause?" Sarutobi shook his head sadly. "I am very sorry Naruto, but you do not possess the qualities necessary to safely lead others, so I cannot promote you."

"I... see," he cast his eyes down. His hands were shaking and his teeth were slowly grinding. Of all the cruelties he had suffered this was the worst, the most hurtful. The one he had always trusted was betraying him. He had won the exams, and he had *earned* promotion. Anyone else would have been automatically promoted. But not him. Once more he was being cheated because of who he was. And it was the old man who was doing it. He could make all the excuses he wanted; the fact was he had *proven* he deserved promotion.

I would have done anything for you old man, he thought bitterly. I'd have gladly given my life to protect yours. I thought of you as my real grandfather. I loved you. How could you betray me?

I won't forgive you.

"Can I go home now?" Naruto quickly wiped his eyes and asked.

The pain in the boy's voice touched Sarutobi's heart. "Of course," he answered. "Go home and rest, I know it's been a difficult day."

Jiraiya sent a questioning look at the Hokage. "Can I have a word in private with you?" At the Hokage's nod Jiraiya leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I thought you wanted me to fully seal the Kyuubi's chakra? Have you changed your mind?"

"No," Sarutobi whispered back. "Sealing that chakra was the only way to placate the clan heads and other ninja, they wouldn't accept anything less. But you said you would need several hours to research the proper counter with the curse seal also involved. Naruto can go home and come back tomorrow."

"Wouldn't it be safer to keep him here under guard until I'm ready?"

"He is not a prisoner," Sarutobi whispered. "He will remain an active duty ninja even after he is given the suppression seal. Hopefully without the Kyuubi's chakra to fall back on he will no longer be under the delusion he is the Kyuubi and will learn to be a functioning ninja. I refuse to give up on him."

They were both careful to keep their voices as low as possible. But neither of them realized that Naruto's hearing was advanced as were his other senses.

He'd heard every word.

Sarutobi stood and nodded. "You can go home Naruto, I will be sending a squad of ANBU to keep an eye on you to make sure there are no attacks by any of my ninja. I want you to return here tomorrow at eight a.m. There are more things we will need to discuss."

When Naruto looked up his eyes were dry and there was a smile firmly in place. His eyes... his eyes were empty. Sarutobi found nothing in them he could read.

"Hai Hokage-sama." Naruto's tone was so polite and formal Sarutobi was not sure if it was meant to be serious or mocking.

Naruto left without another word or look back.

I'll always be your friend

By the time they let him go it was early evening. The sun was down and there were people on the street hurrying home or off to get dinner somewhere. Naruto walked slowly right down the middle of the street. People gave him a wide berth, or better yet turned around the second they spotted him. One important looking fellow stopped right in Naruto's path and smugly stood there with his arms crossed.

Naruto looked at him, and gave him a slow smile. The man visibly paled, and suddenly decided he needed to be somewhere.

Naruto didn't give the idiot much of a thought. If he'd been one of the endless stream who had cursed him or slapped him or thrown something at him as a child he wouldn't have been surprised. It was amazing how the same people who had thought nothing of abusing him when he was helpless were oh so careful around him now. Was the difference due to a change of heart? Had they reflected on their actions and wanted to change?

Naruto let out a loud snort of laughter that made some people flinch.

The only difference was that they all knew he finally had access to the power that was locked inside him. *That* was the only difference, the fact he had power. And now the old man was set to take that away from him.

Like I would ever let that happen.

"I can't believe Minato's son turned out like that." Jiraiya said. "How disappointed Minato would be."

"You are certainly right," the Hokage admitted. "But his disappointment would not be limited to only Naruto."

"What do you mean old man?"

"Minato gave his life to save this village, and his dying wish was that his son be recognized as a hero. Yet the villagers have never seen him that way. Their fear and sorrow have always colored their view of him. Though he was an innocent child he was made to answer for the Kyuubi's actions. And though I tried I was never able to give him the sort of life he deserved. I was never able to really protect him from the village's wrath."

"Don't feel too bad old man, you did your best," Jiraiya said sympathetically.

"I did," Sarutobi said and gave his former student a searing glance. "Can you say the same?"

"What?"

"You were Naruto's godfather, by all rights Naruto should never have been an orphan. He should have been raised by you."

"What are you talking about old man? Do I look like a father figure to you? And anyway I had important work to do!"

"Every elite ninja in this village has important work of one sort or another. However none of them have been absent from the village for a full twelve years." Sarutobi spoke in a stern tone. "Let's be honest Jiraiya, you could have performed your duties and lived here like everyone else. You chose to stay perpetually on the road, always following one lead or another, always on the track of some new important source of information. Any excuse to stay away."

"I was trying to find Orochimaru! That snake can vanish into thin air while standing in front of you! I had to do whatever I could just to keep finding a few faint traces."

"And it had nothing at all to do with avoiding your responsibility to the Yondaime? You were his *godfather* Jiraiya! You accepted that responsibility of your own free will. When Minato died I am sure he believed you would watch out for his son! But you never even tried

to! You never even met his son until I forced you to examine him! If Minato would be disappointed in Naruto's behavior how much more disappointed do you think he would be with yours?"

Jiraiya stood there gaping at the Hokage, looking rather like an overgrown child being scolded. "Wh... where the hell is this coming from?"

"Perhaps it is just the reaction of a foolish old man who has finally been forced to acknowledge his mistakes. I acknowledge that I made many mistakes with Naruto. But I will **not** allow you to stand there and judge him while acting as if your hands were clean. I at least tried Jiraiya; you failed to do even that. So what gives you the right to condemn the boy for his behavior when you never saw the abuse he had to endure? You may be a master spy but you know nothing about your own godson or what his life has been like. Be disappointed in him if you like, but be more disappointed in yourself!"

Jiraiya stood there trying to hide the sudden shame. "I... I didn't know how to be a father," he admitted quietly. "And I don't think I could have borne seeing him back then. He would have reminded me too much of Minato."

Sarutobi nodded wearily, he was very tired. "I know, but you could have tried."

Jiraiya said nothing.

"This has been a long day, go and work on the suppression seal. I am going home to get some sleep."

Naruto stepped inside Ichiraku's and sat down at his favorite stool. Two customers who were already there immediately put down some money and got out. Teuchi and Ayame both looked at him nervously.

People are so damn disappointing. "I just wanted to get something to eat," Naruto said. "If you want me to leave..."

"Don't be silly Naruto!" The old cook shouted. "Sit down and I'll make you some of your favorite miso ramen in honor of you winning the exams today!"

"That's right!" Ayame said. "You are our favorite customer after all."

They were both scared; he knew that from their scents. But they welcomed him any way.

I guess they really are good people. I'm glad. "Thanks," he said quietly.

He was actually pretty ravenous so he had a couple big bowls of miso ramen and enjoyed the simple comfort of being with people who accepted him.

As he ate a few other people arrived at the stand only to turn right around as soon as they spotted him. Teuchi and Ayame made no comment about the lost business. They talked with him about the exams without ever bringing up the Kyuubi or asking him about the actual matches themselves. It was a pleasant conversation.

As he ordered a third bowl he picked up a familiar scent approaching the stand. As the person arrived he looked over his shoulder at him. "Hey Sasuke!"

"Hey Naruto," the boy came over to sit next to him.

Naruto was very surprised that there was no fear scent on him. He smelled of worry and a little exhaustion, but not of fear. "You hungry? Have some ramen with me, I'll even treat!"

"You treat?"

"Hey it's a special occasion! It's not every day a guy wins the Chunin exams and gets to feel the love of his home village!"

Teuchi and Ayame flinched at that. Sasuke gave no outer reaction. "I'll have a bowl of shrimp ramen please," he said to Ayame before turning back to Naruto. "So is it true? What you said during the final match?"

"What? You mean about me being the Kyuubi?" Naruto said gleefully. "Do you think I'd have had that kind of raw power if I wasn't? Or that I would have gotten such a... lavish greeting from the Hokage and everyone else? Yeah, I'm the Kyuubi Sasuke. That bastard the Yondaime couldn't kill the nine tails, so instead he sealed him into a newborn baby, me."

"But you're not really the Kyuubi are you?" Sasuke insisted. "I mean if you seal a kunai into a scroll the scroll is still a scroll not a kunai."

"I'm the Kyuubi," Naruto insisted cheerfully. "If you doubt it ask any adult who was living here during the attack. Trust me; they'll be more than happy to tell you I'm a monster."

"You're not the Kyuubi," Sasuke said with absolute certainty. "There's no way the great demon fox wouldn't be able to make a decent bunshin."

Naruto burst out laughing.

The two teammates sat next to one another and ate. Naruto was in a surprisingly good mood. It was like Ichiraku's was his one safe haven in the middle of a storm. Nothing was going to change; as soon as he left he would have to deal with all the shit that was his life. But for just this little while he could honestly relax.

"You know, if I were going to have a last meal it would always be ramen at this place. I wouldn't want anything else."

"Why do you bring up something like that?" Sasuke asked.

"Well, maybe you didn't notice, some people don't like me much. Who can say what might happen?"

"That's not just true for you, that's true for every ninja."

"Yeah," Naruto admitted. "But maybe it's just a little more true for me."

"Don't worry about it, you've got me and Sakura and Kakashi to watch your back."

"What? You still want to be teammates with me?" Naruto said in surprise. "I would have thought you and Sakura would be pleading for a replacement by now."

Smack!

"Ow! Hey what the hell did you hit me for?!" Naruto began to rub the back of his skull.

"I thought you'd stopped being an idiot but I guess once a dobe always a dobe." Sasuke sounded genuinely annoyed. "Me, Sakura, and sensei have been looking for you since we heard you were released from ANBU headquarters. We're all worried about you and want to make sure you're okay. We're a team and we have to watch out for each other. And since we're friends too we have to make doubly sure you're all right."

"You sure you want to be friends with the Kyuubi?"

"No, but you're *not* the Kyuubi and I *am* friends with you dobe."

"Thanks teme," Naruto replied. Unable to resist he glomped onto Sasuke affectionately imitating one of his fan girls. "Sasuke-kun lllllllllllikes me!"

"Let go of me before I have to kill you dobe."

Having finished his bowl Sasuke got up to leave. "Since you're all right I'm heading home now. I'll see you tomorrow."

"No you won't," Naruto said.

Something in that reply made Sasuke stop in his tracks. "What do you mean?"

"The Hokage wants to meet with me tomorrow. It'll probably be an all day thing."

"Naruto... are you okay?"

He gave him a slow nod. "Yeah, I think I am. Sasuke..." Naruto hesitated. "What... whatever happens, I'll always be your friend."

Sasuke had one of his smirking grins. "And I'll always be yours dobe." Feeling relieved the Uchiha left to return home.

Having finished his own meal Naruto got up as well. "Thanks Teuchi-san, Ayame-chan, you two really are good people. Thank you not just for all the great food but for being nice to me over the years when no one else was." He took out his frog purse Gama-chan and opened it dumping out all the money he had on him, then tossing the purse.

Ayame's eyes boggled at all the money. "Naruto what are you doing?"

He gave them both formal bows. "It's just a tip for services rendered, goodbye."

It was 2 in the morning. He was in his apartment. He hadn't gotten even a wink of sleep. He had all his ninja gear ready and a rough idea of where he would go. At the moment he was just sitting at the rickety table where he ate all his meals staring at a photo. It was a

picture of team seven, Kakashi had insisted on taking it the day after they'd passed.

Glancing at the clock he saw the time. "Well, no point putting this off any more." He placed the photo face down on the table. He then removed his leaf hitai-ite and put it next to the photo.

Returning to his apartment he had picked up the scents of four ninja. He hadn't spotted them but their scents had followed him the last half mile home and had remained there ever since. They would of course be the ANBU the Hokage had detailed to, 'keep him safe.' As though the Kyuubi would need anyone to protect him.

It was finally time for him to go. He felt the seal on his shoulder begin to throb as he worked hand signs. " **Bakuhatsuteki Bunshin no Jutsu.**"

The ANBU guarding him all stiffened as they felt a massive amount of chakra coming from his apartment. The door burst open and dozens of clones rushed out and approached their hiding spots, at least seven or eight came at each of them. Acting on instinct the ANBU defended themselves taking out the clones.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! As they were taken out they detonated and set off the others close by. All four ANBU died in massive explosions.

People woke up with shouts and cries looking out shattered windows to see fires raging on building roof tops. Many of them also witnessed some of the couple hundred exploding clones that were spreading out through the village. As people shouted to each other and wondered what was happening more explosions could be heard.

As confusion spread no one noticed as a solitary figure headed in a direction different from all the others.

Hinata woke as she heard a tapping from her bedroom window. When she looked up she gasped. She tossed aside her blankets and ran to open the window.

"Naruto-kun! What are you doing here?"

With a smile he slid into her bedroom. "Sorry Hinata-chan, but there's something really important I need to ask you."

With me or against me

"Hokage-sama! Hokage-sama!"

Though an old man well into his seventies the Third Hokage was still a ninja and came fully awake at the first shout. He was in his feet and ready for an attack as the door to his bedroom burst open and a pair of ANBU knelt before him.

"What is going on here? What has happened?" He well knew that for his sleep to be disturbed like this there had to be some sort of emergency.

"Lord Hokage! The village is under attack!"

"I see, so Orochimaru has finally made his move. I had suspected something might occur during the exams but it seems he chose to wait until now."

"Lord Hokage Orochimaru is not the one attacking the village," one of the ANBU replied.

"Then who?"

"My Lord Hokage the village is being attacked by Uzumaki Naruto."

Hiruzen Sarutobi stood there too shocked to reply.

In the distance he heard the echo of an explosion.

"It's so... beautiful!" One of his clones was sitting atop the Third Hokage's section of the monument. From here he had a perfect view of the explosions and fires that were going off all over the village. He had especially enjoyed watching a big explosion that had leveled the Ninja Academy. Many of his other clones had hit restaurants and stores that had denied him service. It was a petty sort of revenge but

he would take what he could get. He wouldn't go after the well protected targets; ANBU headquarters, the Hokage mansion, or the Tower. But it was okay, what he was hitting would be enough to fill the village with panic and make his point.

With a smile on his lips he detonated himself. The massive stone face of the Third Hokage fell bringing down a land slide and crushing dozens of buildings and their helpless inhabitants.

"Wha... what do you need to ask me?" Hinata asked. She was dressed in a long flannel nightgown that covered her completely, but having him in her bedroom like this made her very nervous.

He was looking at her with his usual cheerful face. "Will you leave the village with me?"

"Leave the village? Naruto what are you talking about?"

"It's exactly what I just said Hinata-chan, I'm leaving the village tonight and I want to know if you'll come with me."

"Naruto is this one of your pranks? If it is it's not funny, especially not after what happened to you today. I was really worried about you. I was afraid something was going to happen to you."

"Something is happening to me Hinata-chan, I'm leaving the village and going rogue."

"Naruto I, mmmm," she cut off as he placed a single finger on her lips.

"Shhhhh, come to the window and listen." He took her hand brought her over. He then stood behind her and wrapped his arms about her chest. "Listen close and tell me what you hear."

She couldn't believe he was in her room late at night with his arms wrapped around her. It was hard for her to concentrate on anything

else but that. But after a moment she made herself listen. She could make out a dull series of, 'booms.' "Are those... explosions?"

"That's right Hinata-chan," he whispered in her ear playfully. "I'm using my explosive clones to blow up places all around the village."

"What?!" She pulled out of his embrace and faced him, horror on her face. "Are you serious?"

Her reaction killed the smile on his face. "Trust me Hinata-chan; I've never been more serious in my entire life."

"But why?! Why would you do that?"

"Why?! You seriously have to ask?!"

"Naruto please lower your voice!" She whispered urgently. "If anyone hears you'll be in big trouble!"

He laughed. "Hinata didn't you hear what I just said? I am **blowing up** parts of the village even as we stand here. I am killing people; do you think being caught in your bedroom worries me? If anyone comes in here I'll just kill them."

"Naruto!" She gasped.

"Oh come on Hinata don't be so shocked, you know how I've been treated by the people of this place, and you know I'm a monster. Is it surprising I would finally strike back?"

"Naruto you're not a monster!"

"Of course I am! I'm the Kyuubi! Ask anyone; ask your father, I'm sure he'll tell you so."

"You're not a monster Naruto! After what happened in the exams the law about hiding what happened to you was lifted. Some of the elders told me about what happened, how the Yondaime sealed the

Kyuubi into you. What happened to you wasn't your fault and you are not the Kyuubi even if he is a *part* of you!"

"Is that how your father feels?"

Flinching she looked away. "No."

"He sees me as a monster."

"No, but... but he feels you need to be monitored from now on for the safety of the village. He said your demonic chakra would be sealed up from now on and you would not be allowed to leave the village again."

Hinata was not aware that the Hokage had refused this second condition.

"So they're going to strip me of my power and make me a prisoner? Why am I not surprised? Maybe they'll build me a cage and charge people admission to see me." He shook his head in disgust. "I'll never let that happen, I'd rather die. I won't let them use me. It's obvious the only way they'll ever accept me is as a monster. That's fine though; I'll gain power and come back some day. I know I'll be a monster in their eyes but I'll make them all acknowledge me the strongest. I'll become Hokage even if every last person in this place hates me." He looked straight into her eyes. "Even you."

"Naruto I could never hate you!"

"Of course you will!" he said bitterly. "You can make all the stupid promises you want but eh bottom line is that while I'm away everyone will tell you I'm a monster and sooner or later you will believe them. You'll just end up hating me like everyone else." He turned his back to her and stepped up onto the window sill.

"Goodbye Hinata."

"Wait! Don't go! Please!" She grabbed onto his sleeve with both hands desperate to hold onto him.

"I'm going Hinata! I'm leaving! But I'll come back one day, I'll come back to rule this place." He looked at her. She was trembling; tears were running down her cheeks.

He held out his hand to her.

"Come with me."

"But... but..."

"So you don't really love me," he said sadly. He lowered his hand.

"I do! Naruto-kun I have been in love with you for years! You are the most important person in the whole world to me!"

"Then prove it, come with me Hinata-chan. Come with me and I promise I'll never ever let you go. You'll always be at my side, as my girl, and some day as my wife."

"Wi... wife?"

"Of course," he said with a small grin. "Who else would I want but the girl who supported me through everything? The girl who *proved* her love for me when it really mattered. If you come with me now we will never ever be apart again, you'll be mine now and forever. But only if you come with me and do whatever I need you to. Otherwise I won't want you. You are either with me or against me, there is nothing in between. You have to choose Hinata, me or everything else." He held out his hand to her once more. "Which is it?"

She looked at his hand.

"Will... will you really marry me some day?"

"Yes, it's a promise. I'll make you my wife, and when I come back here someday you'll be the Hokage's wife."

"I want to be with you Naruto-kun, more than anything. I... I'll come with you." Reaching out she placed her hand into his.

"You belong to me now," he said. Taking her hand he pulled her up easily into his arms. He leapt away from the Hyuuga mansion with her neatly in his arms.

"Wait! I'm not dressed! I don't have my gear or even my sandals!"

"Don't worry about any of that Hinata-chan," he told her as he raced toward the outer wall.

His escape worked pretty much as he'd expected it too. All the available ninja on duty were called in to deal with the emergency in the village itself. Naruto was able to swiftly run up the side of the wall and leap over. As he did so he took a final look back. In the distance he could see more than a dozen fires burning. They would finally understand that he wasn't their play thing anymore, he didn't belong to them! He knew this would be his last look at Konoha for many years, but he *would* return one day.

I'll come back some day and make every last one of you kneel to me! I swear it! And that includes you too old man.

"Naruto-kun, where are we going?"

"Rain country, at least for now," he said. "They don't have an extradition treaty with Fire and they've been recruiting nuke nin for awhile now. They'll accept anyone who is willing to serve as a rain nin."

Racing through the forests north of Konoha he skidded to a sudden halt and placed Hinata on her feet. "Get behind me Hinata!" He stood protectively in front of her.

"What's wrong Naruto?"

"Ku, ku, ku," laughter rang through the forest. "I did say we would meet again didn't I Naruto-kun?" From out of the ground a very pale

man emerged. As they watched four ninja leapt down to either side of him.

"Orochimaru," Naruto growled. "So you want more of what I gave you in the Forest of Death?"

"Watch your mouth punk!" One of the other four ninja yelled at him.

"Oh it's quite all right Ukon; Naruto-kun is very special to me. After all I've already given him a special gift."

"What the hell do you want?" Naruto demanded.

"To help you," Orochimaru giggled. "You have abandoned your village, and done so in rather spectacular style. You are a missing nin who will be hunted down with all the resources available to the Leaf village. Given who and what you are Naruto-kun they will never ever stop chasing you."

"They can come after me as much as they want! I'll kill every last one of them!"

"And what about the girl?" he asked pleasantly. "You are Hyuuga Hinata I believe?"

Hinata shivered as his reptilian eyes fell to her.

"Never mind who she is!" Naruto snapped. "She's with me, that's all you need to know!"

"Do you think they'll let her go either? They will certainly want to recover her, or failing that eliminate her. Anything would be better than allowing a rogue Hyuuga run wild at your side. Can you keep her safe?"

"I'll kill anyone who threatens her," he said flatly. "Even if he happens to be a Sannin."

"Oh I'm not the Sannin you need to worry about. If I were you I'd be much more worried about Jiraiya. He will certainly be coming after you; I on the other hand could offer you my most generous assistance and protection."

"And why would you do that?"

"Because you and I want the same thing, revenge on Konoha and on the Third Hokage. With my resources and your power anything would be possible. Join me Naruto-kun and I will give you all the things you hunger for, wealth, power, and recognition. In the sound village you will receive the sort of treatment a man of your unique talents deserves."

"I don't trust you," Naruto stated.

"Ku, ku, ku of course not, I'm not very trustworthy. But I am a man who can deliver what he promises. Come with me and I will provide you a safe haven where you can learn and grow stronger without worrying about hunter nins. I can also help you gain greater access to the power inside you. Now doesn't that sound better than constantly being on the run?"

Naruto slowly thought it over. "If you try anything with me or Hinata I will kill you. And so we're clear I *won't* serve you the way I did the Hokage. So don't ever think you can give me orders like a regular ninja."

"I am sure we will be able to come to some sort of mutually acceptable arrangement." Orochimaru promised with a greasy smile."

They came to an uneasy agreement, with both of them thinking they would get the better of the other.

By order of the Hokage

"Over a hundred businesses and private residences have been attacked along with the Ninja Academy and the Hokage Monument." A masked ANBU reported.

"Our preliminary estimates are at least 2,000 civilian casualties along with eight ninja confirmed killed," another ANBU stated.

"All this might have been avoided had the boy been entrusted to me," Danzo stated. "He should have been given proper discipline from the beginning, not allowed to run wild like a delinquent."

"Lord Hokage I really must *insist* my daughter be recovered at all costs," Hiashi demanded. "Her kidnapping is an unforgivable offense against my clan!"

"Your clan?" Inuzuka Tsume growled. "Get your priorities in order! The whole village has been attacked! Any way I wouldn't worry too much about Hinata. Knowing you she probably left of her own free will."

"I resent that!" Hiashi shouted.

"You think I give a damn?" Tsume shouted back.

"Petty arguments aren't helping!" Inoichi cut in sharply.

"None of this would have happened had the Hokage simply taken a firmer hand with Naruto." Hiashi said angrily.

"The Hokage did what he thought was best," Jiraiya shot back. "However it may have turned out his intentions were always good."

"And we all know where good intentions lead don't we?" Hiashi shot back.

The door to the Hokage's office opened and two new arrivals stepped into the already crowded room.

"Glad to see you Kakashi," Jiraiya said. "As Naruto's sensei your input could be really valuable. Sasuke, you shouldn't be here. Please go home."

"No," the boy replied stiffly. "I heard all clan heads were being summoned here for an important meeting. As clan head of the Uchiha my place is here."

"You pick an odd time to begin fulfilling your responsibilities," Homura noted coolly.

"Let the boy stay by all means," Danzo said. "This may prove a valuable experience for him and give him some useful insights into the world of ninja."

"Sasuke do you know anything, anything at all, about where he may be headed or what he may be planning?" Jiraiya asked.

"I only know that whatever he did he must have had a good reason for it. Naruto would never do something like this without a reason!"

Most of the people in the room stared at him as though he had just sprouted a second head.

"Hearing something like that makes me honestly wonder if insanity runs in your family," Danzo said menacingly.

"Shut up! No one wants to hear that!" Jiraiya snapped. "Look kid, I admire your loyalty to a teammate, but there are limits."

"Yes there are!" Sasuke said angrily. "There *are* limits! Limits to how much abuse you can pile onto someone before they finally snap! I saw how people have always treated him, and today I saw the entire village turn on him. Why? What *exactly* was it that he did that was so terrible?" He glared openly at Hiashi. "Was it killing Neji *after* he had

tried to kill Hinata? Was it killing Gaara, who murdered three Rain nin during the exams, crippled Lee, and tried to murder Naruto? Or was it all because he showed you some real power today and you're all suddenly terrified of what the boy you've been abusing all this time might do?"

"That's enough Sasuke!" Hiashi railed. "Don't presume to lecture us! What do you know of the Kyuubi? What could anyone your age possibly know about that monster?"

"I don't know much about the Kyuubi," Sasuke admitted. "But I know Naruto, and I know he is **not** the Kyuubi!"

"I am afraid it no longer matters," a tired voice spoke.

The argument halted as all eyes turned to the Hokage. He was seated behind his desk, shoulders slumped and his head lowered.

He looked like a very tired old man.

"Naruto's reasons no longer matter. Whether he felt himself to be somehow justified no longer matters. With his actions tonight Naruto has betrayed his village and killed the very people he was sworn to protect. That is the only truth that matters now."

The old Hokage looked over at Sasuke. "I have no choice," he said sadly. "Uzumaki Naruto is hereby stripped of his status as a leaf ninja. He is declared an outlaw and enemy of the state. He is to be killed on sight; no effort is to be made towards his capture. I hereby authorize a bounty of one hundred million ryo payable to any person who successfully kills him or provides information that leads to his death. I also order that every possible effort be made to rescue Hyuuga Hinata whom he has kidnapped. Should her rescue not prove feasible I authorize her elimination to prevent the loss of vital information that might harm this village."

Every ninja in the room save Sasuke and Kakashi nodded. Even Hiashi had no objection; Hinata's death was far preferable to her

bringing any sort of disgrace to the clan.

"I authorize and approve the use of any and all resources necessary to fulfill this order. Jiraiya, I am tasking you with this. You may use hunter nins, ANBU, or any other ninja you may require. You may bankrupt the treasury if need be, until Naruto is dead this will be our one and only priority."

"Yeah, I got it," Jiraiya answered solemnly.

"How can you turn on him like this Lord Hokage?" Sasuke asked. "You're not even going to try and capture him? I thought you cared about him! I thought he meant something to you!"

"My personal feelings are not important Sasuke," the old man said wearily. "My duty as Hokage is to do what is best for Konoha. Naruto's potential makes him an even greater threat than Orochimaru or Itachi. For the village's sake I cannot allow him to grow any older."

"In case you haven't noticed yet kid try looking out the window. I'd say Naruto's made his choice. The old man is just doing what he has to. Don't make it harder for him than it already is." Jiraiya said firmly.

"In that case I want to help go after him," Sasuke volunteered.

"Forget it; I'm not risking the last Uchiha like that. Besides, with the pick of the elite ninja of the village I don't need any Genin." Jiraiya's eyes shifted over to the man standing next to Sasuke. "I would like your help though Kakashi."

"Sorry, but I'll have to say no."

"This is an S-rank mission Kakashi," Hiashi pointed out. "You have no right to refuse."

"Then I guess I'll have to be arrested then," he said pleasantly. "But no matter what Naruto's done I can't help kill my sensei's only son."

Minato's ghost would haunt me forever."

"What?! Are you saying..."

"Naruto? He's the Yondaime's..."

"You're lying! It's impossible! It's..."

Shouting erupted from every corner of the room.

Sarutobi turned away, no longer caring. He had done his duty as Hokage. He could trust Jiraiya to handle the rest. Kakashi was refusing an S-rank mission and had just spoken an S-rank secret before more than twenty witnesses. At any other time he would have come down on him like a ton of bricks. Now though... it just didn't seem to matter.

Clutched in his hands where no one could see was Naruto's hitai-ite. The boy had deliberately left it behind. Looking out his window he stared at the Hokage Monument and at the three faces that stared back. *I misjudged*, he thought sadly. *I made the same mistake a second time. I wouldn't let myself see what was there. I really am just an old fool.*

Less than twenty minutes later a truly impressive group of about 200 ninja had gathered by the gate. Every single one of them was of at least Chunin rank. The last time Konoha had sent out such a powerful force for a single mission had been on the night the Kyuubi attacked the village. The entire hunter nin force along with most of the ANBU were here, and every one of them was listening as the legendary Jiraiya spoke.

"By order of the Hokage I am leading all of you out after the missing nin responsible for tonight's tragedy. Our mission is simple; we find him and kill him. Oh, and we'll be rescuing the Hyuuga heiress while we're at it too."

There were eager nods all around. These men and women were ready to put an end once and for all to the threat that had been hanging over them for years.

"Break into units of four and try to have at least one hunter nin or one Inuzuka with each group. If you spot the target *don't* do something stupid like attack him yourselves. Every last one of you *felt* his chakra today. You understand how dangerous he is no matter what he looks like."

Everyone slowly nodded. Even those who had not been in the stands had felt Naruto go five tail. His chakra had been like a bonfire lighting up the night, they'd had felt it even miles away.

"Hyuuga Hiashi, Inuzuka Tsume, Akimichi Chouza, and Nara Shikaku," Jiraiya eyed the four of them. They were each the leaders of their clans and very skilled in what they could do. He had deliberately asked each of them for help and they had each volunteered. "You'll be with me; once Naruto has been spotted we'll be the ones to deal with him. I'll hold back the others; I'd like to keep this from being a blood bath."

"Surely you are giving him too much credit," Hiashi said. "He is still only a Genin."

"A Genin with more chakra than all five of us put together," Chouza said in a serious tone. "And one who knows forbidden techniques."

"Man this is going to be really troublesome," Shikaku muttered. "But if it's got to be done there's no point worrying about it."

"This won't be easy," Jiraiya said. "But together we will take him down."

At his nod the swarm of ninja dashed out the gate and into the night.

The Valley of the End

Tsume was down on all fours with her nose pressed to the ground. Jiraiya and the others were standing nearby along with a squad of Hunter nin. Nodding to herself she got up. "There's no doubt about it," she announced grimly. "The scent belongs to Orochimaru and four others. They met Naruto and Hinata and then departed together heading north."

"Damn it," Jiraiya muttered. "Though after what happened during the exams I suppose I should have expected something like this. He was never one to ever let go of anything he wanted."

Shikaku let out a deep sigh. "This is going to be even more troublesome isn't it?"

Chouza grunted and nodded his head.

"This changes nothing," Hiashi said announced imperiously. "Even if a Sannin is involved we have one as well, to say nothing of a small army. Naruto will be eliminated and my daughter rescued."

"Well it's not like we can turn back," Jiraiya agreed. "But this is going to be a hell of a lot more difficult now."

"Regardless of the difficulty there can be no doubt we will succeed!" Hiashi insisted.

Jiraiya didn't disagree with him though he thought Hiashi was seriously underestimating how much harder things would be. Still... even Orochimaru could only do so much and they had 200 of Konoha's finest with them. How could they face an entire ninja army?

Naruto picked up a *lot* of scents coming down wind. Even so he was caught off guard when their group halted. All at once masked ninja

swarmed out of the nearby woods surrounding them. Still holding Hinata in his arms he felt her squeeze him as she looked around nervously.

He grinned at her reassuringly. "There's nothing to be worried about Hinata-chan." *I hope.*

The hundreds of ninja fell to one knee. "Lord Orochimaru! What are your orders?"

"Ku, ku, ku I expect we'll have visitors here tomorrow. We'll have to make them welcome. In the meantime see to the needs of my guests."

"What are all these foreign ninja doing in the middle of Fire country?" Naruto asked.

"They are the army of Sound and they belong to me," Orochimaru said proudly. "I had brought more than a thousand of them to launch a surprise attack in Konoha."

"What?" Hinata cried horrified. "You were going to attack the village?!"

Orochimaru looked at her curiously. "Does that bother you?"

Hinata looked back into his snake like eyes feeling dread.

Naruto put her down and stepped protectively in front of her. " **We** don't give a damn about the village. I'm sorry you didn't. What happened? You get cold feet at the last second?"

"Hardly," Orochimaru replied with a grin. "I decided to call off the attack for *your* sake Naruto-kun. I didn't want to risk your death before I could recruit you to join me." *I also decided the risk was too great after seeing you butcher Gaara.*

Naruto looked at him suspiciously. He was certain there was more to it than just that. "Gee thanks."

Orochimaru chuckled lightly; he was not used to such blatant sarcasm from his servants. Bringing him over to his way of thinking would certainly be an interesting challenge. In the meantime he would need to handle him with care. "I am sure the two of you are quite hungry and tired. We will have to leave again in a matter of hours so I suggest you eat and get as much rest as you can." He walked away followed closely by his bodyguards.

One of the nameless horde of sound ninja approached him. "We'll have food and a couple tents prepared."

"We only need one tent and one sleeping bag," Naruto told him.

"Eek!"

He turned around and saw Hinata blushing and pressing her fingers together furiously. "Something wrong Hinata-chan?"

"Na... Naruto-kun, you... you're no... not say... saying we should... sleep together, are you?"

Frowning at her he nodded. "Well sure. Didn't I say we'd be together from now on?"

Her blush got even redder. "Bu... but we're... we're only twelve!"

He took both her hands before she sprained her fingers. "I'm not saying we're going to do *that* yet. I just want to be able to fall asleep next to you and be close to you that's all."

He really does want to share a sleeping bag with me! The thought excited and terrified her. "Bu... but we can't! What will people say?"

"What people?" Naruto asked. "Orochimaru? His bodyguards? Them?" he waved an arm at the mass of ninja still surrounding them. "Or are you afraid your dad will find out some how?"

She dropped her head.

Bingo, he thought. "Fuck your dad."

Her head snapped up with a gasp. "Naruto!"

"Fuck your dad!" He repeated. "You don't belong to Konoha or to your clan anymore Hinata-chan, you belong to me."

And as if to prove his point he grabbed her about the waist and pulled her close. Before she could make a sound or think of anything she was being kissed. In front of hundreds of strangers right out in the open he was kissing her.

Her mind blanked out as she realized what was happening. His kiss was a little rough, but it was passionate! It was nothing like the gentle little pecks she had fantasized about. And none of her fantasies had ever involved them being so, so *shameless* as to do this right out in front of a crowd. Even if this wasn't the way she'd imagined her heart was racing and her knees were about ready to give. She was only just able to keep from fainting.

When he ended the kiss he spoke to her in a heated whisper. "You're my girl now Hinata-chan and I don't care who knows it or what they think!"

It felt like he was taking possession of her.

She liked the feeling. She wanted to be only his. "O... okay Naruto-kun."

It was late morning the next day when Tsume delivered more bad news.

"An army?" Jiraiya muttered. "I guess we were right to be worried about an invasion after all." He looked at the Inuzuka clan head. "How big? Since it looks like you swallowed a kunai I'm guessing it's not small."

"It's big," she said in an undertone. There were other Inuzuka among the Hunter nins so there would be no keeping this quiet. "There's no way to tell exactly, but I would guess at least three, maybe four or five times as big as us."

"That's impossible!" Hiashi snapped. "There's no way such a force could have gotten this deep into Fire country without our knowing."

Tsume sent him a pained expression. "Impossible or not they *did* ."

"So what do we do about it?" Shikaku asked in an easy going tone.

"What do you mean?" Hiashi demanded. "This changes nothing! We press on obviously! An army that size won't be able to move faster than a smaller elite force. We will certainly catch them up before they can cross the border."

"Then what?" Shikaku asked. "We have an elite force, sure, but if we attack one that's expecting it and bigger... it'll be a lot more than just troublesome."

"It'll be a blood bath," Tsume said with a snarl. It was hard to tell if she thought that a good or bad thing.

"We could summon reinforcements from Konoha," Chouza suggested.

"By the time they could reach us Naruto and my daughter will be long gone," Hiashi argued. "With Orochimaru hiding them we may never find them again! We must catch them now."

"No matter what it costs?" Shikaku asked quietly.

Hiashi nodded.

"The Hokage's orders were clear," Jiraiya spoke. "Naruto's got to die, no matter what. And I know how good that snake is at hiding." He looked carefully at the four of them. "We'll split off from the rest of the

force and let them attack the army. While their doing that we'll go on a fox hunt."

There was no element of surprise for either side as the battle began. The pursuers and the pursued both knew they would have to fight and there was no hope of ambush. So the Konoha ninja attacked a Sound force that was five times their size, but nowhere near their equal in ability of training. As the second battle of the Valley of the End began five ninja skirted the edge of the fighting and raced for the waterfall that marked the valley's beginning.

Ukon wiped his dirty hands; all the members of the sound four did the same. Tayuya was loudly cursing as she washed hers in the fast flowing river.

"They have all been placed Orochimaru-sama," he stated.

"Marvelous," he murmured. "You may withdraw now and take little Hinata as well."

"She stays with me," Naruto growled.

"Do you really want to put her in that sort of danger?" Orochimaru asked amused. "Jiraiya will certainly come here, he may decide to kill her right off the bat. Allow her to go; she will be quite safe I assure you."

He looked at her. He looked off to the valley a few miles away where dust and smoke were rising from the pitched battle. Looking unhappy he ultimately nodded. "If anything happens to her..."

"We'll take good care of her," Ukon promised with a laugh.

"Naruto-kun I don't want to go!" Hinata pleaded.

"It's all right Hinata-chan," he told her tenderly. "I'll definitely be fine and come see you as soon as I can."

There were a few more words of argument, but there was never a real doubt that she would do whatever he said. Orochimaru watched as they embraced before parting.

"Isn't love a marvelous thing?" He asked as soon as they were gone.

Naruto looked at him dangerously. "Don't ever hurt her or I swear you'll regret it."

"I wouldn't *dream* of hurting dear little Hinata-chan," he promised. *She will be ever so much more useful to me as a tool for controlling you.* "Now then let me show you a very special jutsu."

With a kunai he sliced open his palm and performed a summoning. Out of the ground a wooden casket arose.

On its sides was written, 'The Honored Yondaime Hokage.'

"No way," Naruto gasped.

As he watched the coffins lid slid open and a figure stepped out of it. He was dressed in a trench coat and a Jonin vest. The face was one he had never seen in person but was still recognized at once. He'd seen plenty of pictures, and the profile had been cut in stone above him for as long as he could remember. The man simply stood there looking out at the two huge statues and the valley below.

"The Valley of the End," he murmured. "Why am I here?"

"Hello again Minato-kun," Orochimaru greeted cheerfully. "It's been a long time."

The Yondaime turned to stare at Orochimaru. "You... you brought me here? Why?" He demanded.

"To have you fight for me of course," he answered. "Why else?"

The Yondaime shook his head. "Only you would try to perform *this* jutsu. You must know I would never serve you, alive or dead."

"You don't have a choice I fear; so long as you are here you belong to me."

"You really are the Yondaime," Naruto said softly. Despite his own personal grudges he couldn't keep a little awe from his voice. For a long time the Yondaime had been his hero and his role model.

Minato looked at him, noticing him for the first time. His eyes widened. "Naruto?"

"Huh? How would you know me?" Then comprehension struck. "Oh, yeah, we *have* met haven't we? Yeah, I'm Naruto, the poor unlucky bastard whose life you ruined."

"Ruined?" He sounded pained. "Don't the people of Konoha treat you as a hero?"

Naruto laughed. "A *hero* ?! Are you serious? They treat me like I'm a demon, like I'm the scum of the earth. I'm twelve and until I was able to access the Kyuubi's power I spent my life alone and abused."

"Alone? Abused? But what about Jiraiya? Your godfather? Hasn't he been taking care of you?"

"Jiraiya my godfather?" Naruto stared at him as though he were crazy. "What are you talking about? I only met the guy a few weeks ago, and that was just so he could check on my seal. Now he's on his way to try and kill me."

"Kill you?" Minato whispered in horror. "That's not possible! He would never kill you."

"Oh, but he would," Orochimaru assured and approached him. "You see after a lifetime of abuse at the village's hands Naruto has abandoned Konoha and decided to join me. To prevent losing the

Kyuubi's power dear old Sarutobi-sensei has sent Jiraiya out with a small army to exterminate him."

Minato looked stunned and sick. "It can't be."

"It is," Orochimaru said. "When Jiraiya arrives you can ask him yourself." He slid a kunai with a special seal into the back of the Yondaime's head. "There, now the seal is complete." *What a shame I can only use it once. Oh well I still have the first and the second saved for another day.*

Minato stared at Naruto. "I'm sorry; this was not what I wanted for you."

Naruto grinned back at him coldly. "Well what the hell did you expect to happen to me when you put the fox in my belly?"

"I wanted them to acknowledge you as a hero; I wanted my sensei, Jiraiya to care for you... my son."

"Son?" Naruto blinked.

"I am your father," Minato said and held out his arms.

"My father?"

Minato nodded with his arms still held out to him. "Your mother's name was Uzumaki Kushina, she was my beloved wife. She died shortly after you were born. For the good of the village I was forced to use you to complete the reaper death seal and save Konoha. But it was always my hope that you would have a good and happy life."

Naruto could only stare as the words sank in. He was the son of the Yondaime Hokage, one of the most beloved heroes in Konoha's history. All the time he'd been treated like dirt he'd actually been a hero's son, a Hokage's son. But that wasn't what hurt him most.

For the good of the village

Those were the very same words Shizuku's mother had used to justify sacrificing her.

"You... you put the Kyuubi into your own son?" he looked at the man as though he were the lowest form of life possible. "What kind of father would do that?! All my life I just figured I was unlucky, that I had a hard life, that I was alone all the time, that I couldn't make friends. I just always figured it was bad luck. Then when I found out the real reason for my suffering I just figured it was luck again. I mean you needed a baby and I was born that night, so it was just my bad timing. But now I find out that I was your own son and you sacrificed me **on purpose** ! You chose to do this to me! A father's supposed to protect his children! You *should* have protected me! Instead you condemned me! What the hell sort of father are you?"

"I had no choice; it was to save the village."

"Were there any other children you could have used?" Naruto demanded. "Were there any other babies?"

"There were," Minato admitted and lowered his arms. "But as Hokage I felt it was my duty to sacrifice myself, and as my heir I felt it was yours to be the Kyuubi's container. I had faith you would do great things one day."

"That's great," Naruto said bitterly. "Do you expect me to thank you?! You knew I'd be an orphan, that no one would take care of me. Why didn't you let some other lucky baby, one with parents maybe, make the noble sacrifice? You could have done that! Then I'd still have been alone but at least I would have gotten to have some kind of life. You chose to make me suffer you bastard!"

"Son..."

"I'm not your son!" He screamed. "Go back to whatever hell you were roasting in!"

Orochimaru saw movement approaching. "Touching as this family reunion is, we will have to cut it short I'm afraid."

Despite desperately wanting to say more Minato was compelled to look away and look at the approaching ninja.

The squad led by Jiraiya halted before them. They of course all noticed the appearance of the Yondaime, but having not witnessed eh summoning assumed it to be some sort of cheap illusion.

"Is this what you're reduced to you bastard?' Jiraiya demanded. "Do you really think I'll take it easy on you just because you whistle up the image of my student?"

"Jiraiya-sensei," Minato spoke. "Is it true you abandoned my son? Is it true you're here to kill him?"

Despite believing it to be a genjutsu Jiraiya still found the words discomfoting. "It's a good illusion I'll give you that much. I had more important work to do than raise a kid, and yes I'm here to kill him. I'm sorry about having to do that but after what he pulled there really is no choice now."

"How could you break my trust sensei?" Minato asked heartbroken. "You were his godfather."

Gasping he sent a startled look at Orochimaru. "How did you know that? Only Minato, Kushina, and the old man and I knew!"

"I didn't," Orochimaru said smugly. He glanced at Minato. "Show them your power Yellow Flash of Konoha."

At his feet Jiraiya noted a half buried kunai.

There was a formula carved into it and it had three blades.

"Crap! Run!" Jiraiya had just enough time to perform a shun shin and disappear. The others were still convinced this was only an illusion and hesitated before fleeing.

" **Hirashin no Jutsu.**" There was a momentary flash of yellow light.

In the very next instant Minato was standing amid the four Konoha clan heads. Each of them had their throats cut and blood spraying. It took a moment for them to realize that they'd just been killed.

Laughing Orochimaru saw them each stumble and then topple over.

"I doubt Jiraiya will have the courage to come back knowing what he would be up against," Orochimaru said. He nodded to the distant battle on the other end of the valley. "Why don't you go and enjoy yourself Naruto-kun? Show all of them the power they threw away."

"Yeah!" He said savagely and let the Kyuubi's power fill him to overflowing. As five tails formed he looked at the Yondaime. "**I will do great things! I'll be Hokage one day! But I won't do it your way! I'll make them fear me, that's how the Kyuubi will rule over them.**"

He gave Minato no chance to reply even if Orochimaru would have permitted it. He launched himself over the water fall and sped towards the battle.

Powerless to do anything else Minato could only shed a tear.

There is no turning back

When Orochimaru finally tracked him down Naruto was bent over and shaking. The Sannin could see he was pale and coated in sweat.

"Ku, ku, ku you shouldn't push yourself so far Naruto-kun, even you have limits."

Despite his exhaustion Naruto still found the strength to glare. "I'm fine," he growled.

Orochimaru grinned back. "Of course you are." He was actually quite pleased to see that even the fearsome young jinchuuriki was not inexhaustible. He would need to keep reminding the boy of that. "I'm afraid your father has returned to the shinigami's belly. I hope there wasn't anything else you wanted to say to him."

"He's not my father," Naruto said.

"Did any of them get away?"

The smile that lit up the blonde's face was savage. "Not one, they tried but I wouldn't let them. I killed every last one of them!"

"Except for Jiraiya," Orochimaru pointed out mildly.

Naruto glared at him again, but nodded.

"That's quite all right Naruto-kun, no one expects you to be perfect."

Looking unhappy Naruto straightened up. "Let's go back and attack the village. Screw running away, with my power..."

"You would die," Orochimaru said pleasantly. "Konoha lost a lot of ninja today, but the village has roughly three **thousand** of them. Even with your great power you would have no hope of defeating all

of them. Remember, even now you have only a fraction of the Kyuubi's true strength. With my help you will eventually be able to summon and control *all* of it. On that day Konoha will kneel and proclaim you Hokage." Orochimaru shrugged carelessly. "Or we will darken the sky with their ashes."

Naruto looked south longingly.

Finally he looked back to Orochimaru. "Fine," he muttered unhappily.

Orochimaru was well pleased. He doubted Konoha would dare try sending another army to attack him. Assassins certainly, but they would never dare try and actually invade Sound now. With Naruto at his side he would be able to openly proclaim himself Otokage and Sound the sixth great ninja village. Konoha wouldn't recognize him, Suna probably wouldn't either, but he was sure the other villages would.

With the Kyuubi's potential and his own genius **nothing** would be out of reach. He smiled at the proud boy. *You may distrust me now but I will make you love me. I will stain you with my colors.*

One Week Later

The Hokage was having a private meeting with the newly appointed Fifth Kazekage. Almost as soon as she'd been selected she'd come here to loudly proclaim that Suna wanted to assist in killing both Orochimaru and Naruto. They had also been quite persistent in declaring their continued commitment to the alliance between them.

Sarutobi thought them a little *too* persistent in fact.

"Just how did Orochimaru manage to meet the previous Kazekage all alone?" Sarutobi asked quietly. "That would seem a rather shocking failure in security."

Chiyo gave him an empty mouthed grin. She was one of the very few ninja still alive who could claim to be Sarutobi's senior. Despite her appearance she was still quite formidable and her mind was still as sharp as it had ever been. "I agree, quite a *shocking* failure. But then it *must* have been that, what other explanation is there?"

That he knowingly conspired with Orochimaru and was betrayed by him. "I certainly cannot think of any other possibility."

The aged Kazekage nodded politely.

They both knew what the likely truth was, but for their own reasons neither could admit to it. The entire point of the exchange had been to say it without saying it, both of them could look underneath the underneath. What they had actually said was this:

I don't trust you, Sarutobi had said.

I know you don't, Chiyo had said.

But I'll still work with you.

Chiyo's nod had been her acceptance of that. So long as Orochimaru and Naruto were out there conspiring they needed each other.

There was little more to be said (or not said) after that and the Kazekage soon took her leave.

Before his next visitor arrived Sarutobi sat there calmly smoking his pipe contemplating what might have been. It was clear now that the person who had pretended to be the Kazekage could have been none other than Orochimaru. And given the size of the army Jiraiya's force had encountered it seemed clear what his intentions had been. Orochimaru had planned to personally assassinate him and then attack the village.

Why he had not done so after putting himself in that position was a mystery. He could only assume that Naruto's display of power had somehow dissuaded him. *What terrible irony*, Sarutobi thought. *He unknowingly saved us from one attack only to attack us himself.* Naruto should never have become the village's enemy; it should never have come to that. For the hundredth time Sarutobi wondered where he had gone wrong, what he might have done to prevent it.

The second battle of the Valley of the End had been a disaster. The worst to hit the village since the Kyuubi's attack. Two hundred of Konoha's best ninja, including four clan heads, much of the ANBU, and almost all the hunter nins were gone. The village was still a power, but it was no longer what it had been. Their edge had been dulled and it would take years to sharpen it again. He would have to take some extreme steps to hurry the process along. In the ninja world any perceived weakness was dangerous.

Five people stood before him. He'd delayed meeting them to allow time for grieving and healing, but the needs of the village were pressing.

"I wanted to extend to you my deepest condolences on your losses," Sarutobi said sincerely. "I also want you to know I have faith that each of you will do your best for your clans and for the village."

"That's nice of you," Nara Shikamaru mumbled. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and he looked disinterested, but his eyes were staring back angrily.

Shikamaru has grown into an adult, an angry one, Sarutobi noted sadly. Technically all ninja were adults as soon as they received their hitai-ites. In practice they matured and grew up at their own paces. It seemed Shikamaru had been forced to mature all at once.

Chouji still seemed a bit stunned even a week after losing his father and was standing very close to Shikamaru.

"Thank you for your support Hokage-sama," Inuzuka Hana said. Unlike the other new clan heads she was eighteen and an adult in name as well as title. She was a gifted medic nin who specialized in veterinary medicine. Sarutobi had no doubts that she would do well in her new role.

"Thank you Hokage-sama," Hyuuga Hanabi said formally. If she had any doubts or worries she kept them well hidden behind a calm Hyuuga demeanor.

Behind her stood Hyuuga Enya, an elder of the main branch. "As you know Hokage-sama though Hanabi has been designated heir she is still far too young to actually lead. I and the elders will be in charge until she comes of age."

And you will also be in charge of her education as well, Sarutobi thought with regret. The elders of the Hyuuga clan were even more hidebound and in love with tradition than Hiashi had been. Sarutobi had held a secret hope that when Hinata became clan head a change in their traditions might be possible. There now seemed no chance of that. By the time Hanabi was installed clan head she would be hold the exact same views as the elders. It was a shame, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Thank you all of you," Sarutobi said. "I trust that you will all do your part to keep Konoha strong." He nodded a polite dismissal.

As the others turned to go Shikamaru remained where he was. "If it's not too troublesome I have a question."

"Yes?" Sarutobi asked carefully.

"What do you plan to do about Naruto?"

About what I would have expected, Sarutobi thought. "We will handle that as best we can."

"Which means you don't have any idea of what to do," Shikamaru interpreted. "That's not good enough." He didn't raise his voice or shake his fist. As defiant as the words were his tone and body language remained as passive as could be.

"You cannot speak to the Hokage like that," Hyuuga Enya said sharply. "Even if you are a clan head."

"Just what do you plan to do about Naruto?" Shikamaru spoke ignoring Enya. "Just leave that bounty out there? Send a few assassination squads and pray they can somehow find him and deal with him?"

Sarutobi did not reveal just how uncomfortably accurate that assessment was. Unfortunately there really *wasn't* anything more they could do for the time being. "I am sorry Shikamaru but I cannot discuss my plans with you."

Shikamaru nodded just as if he'd openly agreed with his estimate. Despite his laziness the boy was sharp. "I formally request to be placed in the ANBU Black Ops and given the mission of executing Uzumaki Naruto."

The others in the room except for the Hokage gasped at his audacity.

Sarutobi eyed him carefully, that he was absolutely serious the Hokage did not doubt. "Genin are not permitted into the ANBU," the Hokage told him. "You would have to at least achieve the rank of Tokubetsu Jonin."

Shikamaru gave him a single sharp nod. "Fine, once I reach Jonin will you assign me to the Black Ops and give me the mission of killing Naruto?"

If determination alone could do it then Shikamaru might be the one for the job. "Very well, once you are a Jonin or Tokubetsu Jonin I will promote you to the ANBU and assign you that mission."

"One year," he said. "I will make Jonin in one year." He nodded to Chouji. "You too Chouji, even if it takes you longer I'll need you to help me. Ino too, though I know that'll be troublesome."

"Sure Shika," Chouji replied as though it were nothing but a small favor.

"You know the last person to make ANBU by thirteen was Uchiha Itachi," Hana pointed out.

"So what?" Shikamaru replied. "That just proves that it can be done."

Hana grinned at him; she didn't really know him personally but had heard about him plenty from Kiba. "You do know that making Jonin in a year will require an awful lot of work don't you?"

"Some things are worth the effort," Shikamaru answered her.

Sarutobi looked at the young boy. *He might actually be able to do it.*

The remaining members of team seven were currently in his office. These days the three of them were about the only ones still willing to speak up for Naruto. Given the number of lives he had taken both in his escape and at the battle the whole village was now certain that he should have been murdered in his crib.

"What can I do for the three of you?' The Hokage asked.

He had expected Kakashi to answer but instead it was Sasuke who stepped forward. "We want to join the ANBU in order to capture Naruto and return him to the village."

The Hokage slowly shook his head. "That is impossible Sasuke."

"Why?" He demanded.

"First off both you and Sakura are only Genin and that automatically disqualifies you from joining the ANBU. If Kakashi wishes to I will

permit it, but then he would no longer be able to act as your sensei."

"I don't think the kids are ready for that," Kakashi said pleasantly.

"Besides that even if I agreed your mission would be to kill Naruto, not capture him."

"Are you really that eager to kill him?" Sasuke demanded angrily.

"It is too late for anything else Sasuke," the Hokage told him wearily. "Naruto is a nuke nin and an enemy by his own choice. We cannot simply ignore what he has done and welcome him back again. It's impossible."

"I won't accept that," Sasuke told him. "None of us will! Naruto is still our teammate and our comrade and more than that he's our friend!"

"You still believe that after everything he's done?" Sarutobi asked dryly.

"Yes I do," Sasuke said fiercely. "The last time I ever saw him he told me he would always be my friend and I believed him! Even after all that's happened I know it's not too late to redeem him and return him to the village."

"I'm sorry Sasuke," Sarutobi told him. "If I believed that I would do anything in my power to make it happen. But he's killed leaf nin and attacked the village. There is no turning back now."

The Uchiha stared back defiantly at the Hokage; there was clearly no give in him. "I won't give up on him no matter what, neither will sensei of Sakura."

"I do admire your loyalty Sasuke, but time may eventually force you to change what you believe."

Sasuke shook his head. "Never, no matter what I'll save my friend."

Time will tell, Sarutobi thought.

A wonderful night

Three Years Later

Otogakure, the ninja village hidden within the sound, was in the midst of a vast celebration. This was the third anniversary of their leader proclaiming himself Otokage and Oto the Sixth Great Shinobi Village. Konoha and Suna had refused to recognize him, and thanks to their hostility the lands of Fire and Wind were closed to his sound ninja. Likewise any leaf or sand nin entering Rice Country would be killed on sight. The villages were not formally at war, but they were open enemies and their hostilities were always just one small step short of it.

Iwa, Kiri, and Kumo all recognized Oto as an equal and acknowledged Orochimaru as a Kage. Lords and businessmen from the lands of Earth, Mist, Lightning, and the non aligned countries all employed sound ninja. Though still in its infancy the village was thriving. Civilians and ninja from all over the continent came here in hopes of a fresh start. Missing nin and other outcasts were welcomed and given the Otokage's protection so long as they swore loyalty to him. Ordinary people came here to find work and start businesses. The village was enjoying an economic and building boom as new construction could be seen everywhere. The ninja who lived and worked here brought in money and needed places to live, places to eat, places to shop, and every other kind of service. People were only too happy to emigrate here and fulfill those needs. There was a sense among both the ninja and civilians that the future was limitless.

People had faith in the genius of the man who had founded their new home, and who had turned it from empty land to a great ninja village in less than a decade. People also had faith in Lord Uzumaki and in his awe inspiring power. With Orochimaru's genius and Lord Uzumaki's strength anything seemed possible.

And if there were some dark rumors about what happened inside the Tower of Sound and in other places, so what? Every ninja village had its secrets and its darker side.

The members of the Sound Seven were gathered in the courtyard of the Tower of Sound. Or at least six of them were. Their commander was inside talking with the Otokage. Trained by Orochimaru himself they were the elite bodyguard and strike force of the Otogakure. They were not only tasked with protecting their master but with special missions that were too important or too sensitive to trust to others.

As they waited Jirobo looked up at the clear blue sky. "I'm looking forward to the fireworks tonight. What do you suppose Kimimaro would say if he were alive right now?"

"Get me out of this fucking box! I'm not dead!" Tayuya yelled miming pound on an invisible wall with her fists.

Most of the others laughed but Jirobo and one other looked at her disapproving. "You shouldn't make light of that Tayuya, he was our comrade and leader."

"He was a humorless prick who scared the shit out of all of us," Tayuya said not backing down a bit. "And I breathed a big sigh of relief the day he croaked."

"I wish you wouldn't curse like that," Jirobo said for perhaps the millionth time.

"I agree," Haku added. "Such language is not proper, especially among friends."

"Fuck you both," she said almost as a reflex. She turned to another member of her team. He had laughed the loudest at her little joke. "How the fuck is he your student? I swear he's as different from you as night and day."

Zabuza shrugged. "He's been that way since the day I found him in the gutter half frozen. I'm used to it and don't care how he talks."

"Thank you Zabuza-sama," Haku said with a nod of his head.

The two had been missing nin from Mist and had come in about two years ago after a couple close calls with Hunter nins. Orochimaru had taken an interest in them, especially in Haku and his unusual kekkei genkai. He'd given both of them some special training and eventually promoted them to the bodyguard, expanding its membership from five to seven. Sakon and his brother Ukon, Jirobo, Tayuya, Kidomaru, Zabuza, and Haku made up the squad.

Along with its leader.

The large doors of the Tower opened and two very colorful figures stepped out ahead of a small procession of ninja and civilian ministers. One of them was a pale man in white and gold Kage robes. The other was dressed in a bright orange jacket and black pants. He also wore black gloves on his hands so that only his face could be seen. Lord Uzumaki Naruto, commander of the Sound Seven, head of the Uzumaki clan, Minister of Ninja Affairs, and the Vice Kage. He was the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi whose power had slaughtered the leaf forces at the Valley of the End three years ago. He was the second most powerful man in Oto, answerable to no one but the Otokage himself.

"Ku, ku, ku a fine day for a festival, don't you think Naruto-kun?" Orochimaru asked.

Naruto laughed. "You just want an excuse to have people see you wearing that." He nodded to the gold and white robes and hat that sparkled in the sun. "You're like a little kid playing dress up."

The ninja and the ministers walking behind them gasped. No one else would ever dare say such a thing. It was proof of Naruto's position that he could not only say it but think nothing of it.

Orochimaru took no apparent offense as he chuckled lightly. "Your clothing is not much less conspicuous than my own."

"I like orange."

"Obviously."

Orochimaru was quickly surrounded by his ministers and others who would walk with him along the parade route. Naruto went over to his team. "We've confirmed at least two assassination squads are in the village, possibly more. If they interrupt the parade it will look bad." He gave them all a big smile. "We don't want that now do we?"

His teammates laughed. Where Orochimaru's personality inspired fear and distrust, Naruto's naturally put people at ease.

"It might be just a little embarrassing," Sakon agreed.

"I have kage bunshins disguised in henges all along the parade route and there are plenty of regular ninja there as well. You know the routine."

They all nodded. Dealing with assassins was a regular occurrence.

"Then let's go."

They all leapt away and vanished as the Otokage set out. They would not act as shields; there were plenty of ANBU to take care of that. They would go out and try to find the enemy before they could cause any trouble.

A lone figure stood in the middle of a crowd less than half a mile from the Tower. He was dressed in plain work clothes but underneath more than one hundred explosive notes were taped to his body. He was a leaf ninja and this would be a one way mission, but if he could trade his life for Orochimaru's it would be well worth it.

He was not worried about dying. What plagued his mind was the possibility of failure. Over the last three years countless assassins had been sent here to target Orochimaru and Naruto. All had failed miserably. The huge bounties on their heads had even inspired a few nuke nin to give it a try, though with no more success.

Their body guards seemed very good at...

The crowd stirred as a man in work clothes suddenly jerked about and fell. In the confusion no one noticed three senbons sticking out of the back of his neck.

"Please excuse me!" A ninja in his teens said as he leapt down and picked the man up in his arms. "This man needs medical attention!" The ninja then vanished with his injured patient.

On a nearby roof top Zabuza nodded his approval as Haku reappeared with the dead would be assassin. "Very nice, he was dead before he could even think to detonate his explosive notes. I'm glad you finally go over your silly hesitations about killing."

"That is due all to your training Zabuza-sama," Haku said. He quickly opened the man's shirt and removed the explosive tags.

Two Suna nin skulked in a back alley, dressed in old rags and sitting amid trash trying to look despondent. Like the other assassins sent here today they had explosive tags strapped on. Also like the others they used actual disguises rather than a henge. Elite ninja could sense an active henge, if they were to have any chance at all they had to get close and stay undetected for as long as possible.

"What do you think happened to Shinji?" One of them asked in a low murmur.

"He got careless and he got caught," the other one answered back just as quietly.

"What do you think they did to him?"

His partner turned to him with a dark look. "Don't know, but I doubt it was pleasant." Orochimaru had a particularly gruesome reputation when it came to ninja prisoners. Ninja interrogations were never gentle affairs but the Sannin seemed to have a real genius for finding unusual and effective ways to inflict pain.

The other nin nodded his agreement. "You think he talked?"

As his partner answered he heard a flute playing from somewhere.

"If he did we're all dead men," he suddenly laughed. "Well actually even if he didn't we're still all dead men. But we won't achieve anything I guess."

The other man was about to reply when he heard squealing coming from the trash they were sitting in. Without warning a horde of rats leapt out onto them. The two men were abruptly covered by them being bitten and scratched at. They flailed their arms about trying to beat them off without resorting to jutsus that would give them away.

Caught in the genjutsu neither Suna nin noticed as Jirobo leapt down. Slamming his meaty fists into the back of their heads he knocked them both out.

The flute music abruptly stopped.

"They alive?" Tayuya called down from the nearby roof.

"Yes," Jirobo said. He was already busy pulling off their explosive notes.

Tayuya gave a nasty laugh. "That's their shitty luck then. When Orochimaru starts using them for his experiments they'll wish they were dead."

"Language," he said half heartedly. But he nodded, anything would be better than to be one of the Otokage's test subjects.

From his concealed position on a roof several blocks from the parade route Takahiro could see the procession approaching the amphitheater where Orochimaru would make his speech and then give the signal to commence the feast. The fact that it had gotten this far and he had heard no explosions meant the others had failed and were likely dead or captured. It was up to him then.

He was an ANBU captain in his thirties and had been for several years, one of a handful who had not been killed at the Valley of the End. By sheer luck he had been out of the village on the mission the night Naruto turned traitor. He had come home to find the heart and soul of the ANBU torn out. He'd spent the last few years working to rebuild the organization from the ground up. Given the immensity of the job the Hokage had appointed Danzo as commander, a man not fully trusted but one of great skill and strength of will. Danzo had a remarkable job of rebuilding and some truly talented ninja had joined the ranks. The Nara boy was a real prodigy and so was Sasuke; both of them were ANBU captains. And having Hatake Kakashi back also helped. But even with all that it would still be years before the ANBU fully recovered.

Konoha remained weakened and dangerously vulnerable, and it was all the fault of those two traitors. He knew there was almost no chance of actually reaching his target, but he would try his damndest. And if nothing else he would take some of the enemy with him.

Takahiro was about to leap off when an overwhelming terror hit him. In his mind's eye he saw the Kyuubi standing before him. The nine tail demon growled down and he could feel its hot breath. His heart was racing and he couldn't breathe. His entire body was locked up and useless. He couldn't even focus enough to detonate the explosive tags. He'd been in many fights and had felt killer intent before, but this was overpowering. It was the exact same terror he'd felt fifteen years before when he'd faced the real Kyuubi!

"Neat trick, huh?" Naruto said as he came out and stood in front of the helpless ANBU. "Orochimaru taught it to me."

He desperately wanted to blow himself up and kill the traitor, but no matter how he tried he couldn't focus enough to do anything!

Naruto calmly took a kunai and put it to the man's throat. "And now I'm going to do you the biggest favor anyone has ever done for you in your entire life."

As he was unable to detonate the tags he was equally helpless to prevent his throat being cut wide open.

"What did you do that for?" Kidomaru asked. "You know how much the Otokage likes having ninja to experiment with."

Naruto grinned as he gathered up the seals. "It's a holiday, everyone deserves a little good luck don't you think?"

Kidomaru shook his head while Sakon laughed.

As they entered the amphitheater Orochimaru turned to his special guest. A short man with a bulbous nose who was dressed in white and brown robes of the Tsuchikage. "I do hope your hip is not bothering you too much Tsuchikage-san."

"It's fine, thanks Otokage-san," the little man bit back. In truth his hip was bothering him, but he wasn't about to show any weakness. "So it looks like you made it all the way home. I suppose I should congratulate you, though I still say you are a fool to do this knowing there were assassins waiting."

Orochimaru laughed. "I have faith in my people to protect me, especially Naruto. In any case I am not easily killed."

The small man could only nod at that. "I'm glad I accepted your invitation to come here for a state visit." He raised an amused eyebrow. "Though I hope you treat me better than you did the Kazekage."

He waved that off like a small thing. "The Kazekage tried to break an agreement with me; I trust *you* would never be so foolish."

"I haven't agreed to anything," the Tsuchikage said. *Yet.*

Orochimaru grinned, as if he could hear that last unspoken word. "Of course, come let us enjoy the festivities."

As the Otokage spoke to the waiting crowd a beautiful dark haired girl with lavender eyes stood at the rear of the stage waiting patiently. On the ring finger of her left hand she wore a gold band.

Two arms grabbed her and lifted her off her feet.

"Eek!" She instinctively activated her byakugan and readied to deliver a palm strike.

"Miss me Hina-chan?" Naruto asked with a laugh before giving his wife a kiss.

"Naruto-kun! I wish you wouldn't do that! I'm going to end up killing you by mistake one of these days!" That was no idle threat; Hinata had become *very* proficient at jyuuken and could deliver a lethal strike to the heart or head with just one hit.

Naruto pulled her closer and delivered another long searing kiss. "Then I guess you'll need to revive me then."

Along with being a deadly close combat specialist she had studied medical jutsu with Orochimaru's special agent Kabuto. She was proficient at both killing and healing. At first she had struggled, but with Naruto's constant encouragement she had improved by leaps

and bounds. Her need to be able to help him had driven her hard to improve and be as powerful as she possibly could.

As he kissed his wife some more Naruto let his hands drop down her back until he could give her nice round ass a squeeze.

"Eek!" She quickly jumped away from him and looked around at the surprised faces. "Not here Naruto-kun! When we're alone fine, but not here!"

"Awww, come on Hina-chan," he said giving her his best sad puppy dog eyes.

Once that would have worked like a charm, but now she crossed her arms and shook her head. "Not until we go home."

Seeing he was beaten he nodded.

Eventually she let him put his arms around her again and hold her tight. He was holding her as the fireworks filled the night sky with color and light.

It was a wonderful night.

Loving, dreaming, planning

Despite the best efforts of Konoha and Suna the celebration went off without a hitch. The citizens of Oto got to enjoy themselves and Orochimaru got to play the role of benevolent ruler to their loud and thunderous applause. Once the fireworks faded Naruto and Hinata left the celebration to return to their home. The palatial Uzumaki estates were a fitting residence for Oto's first clan; they were modeled after the Hyuuga in Konoha and were vast with every possible convenience including a private dojo and indoor pool.

When they returned though the two of them went directly to the master bedroom.

"So can I grab your ass now?" Naruto teased as he did just that.

Laughing Hinata wrapped her arms around him. "Yes, **now** you can."

They began to kiss eagerly. She let out a soft moan when she felt his hands playing and teasing her breasts. Since it had been a festival she had not dressed in her usual ninja clothing. She had gone out in a pale lavender kimono with flowers stitched in the design. Carrying herself with a dignity and poise drilled into her since she could walk people had all seen her as the royal lady she was. That was just one more role she served to help her darling husband.

Now that they were alone Naruto was pulling her kimono off and tossing it to the floor. She had nothing on underneath and as soon as she was naked his mouth was at her breast sucking like a newborn hungry for milk.

"Aaaaah, Narutoooo!"

He brought her to the bed and pressed her down into it as he quickly got rid of his clothes. As he took off his orange jacket he exposed some of the seals that covered his body. The ones that could be

seen now were drawn in black ink and covered him from his neck to his feet. Removing his black gloves they were on the back of his hand, his palm, and even written out in small runes and symbols on each finger. Most of his skin was covered in black ink.

These were Orochimaru's handiwork and Naruto's. Over the last three years Naruto had studied the art of sealing with a special passion and could now be accurately called a seal master. The seals on his body had a myriad of purposes. Some were meant to aid him in accessing the Kyuubi's power, some were meant to suppress the Kyuubi's persona, some were defensive, aimed at preventing any sort of mind controlling jutsu or the Kyuubi's extraction; making a repeat of the Yondaime's jutsu impossible.

Naruto never allowed anyone but Orochimaru or Hinata to see them; they were his most closely guarded secret.

Hinata had long since grown used to them and he no longer gave their appearance much thought. As soon as all his clothes were off he jumped on top of her and began to make savage, passionate love. She cried out again and again begging him on grabbing on with arms and legs to encourage him.

As he entered her, as he slid in and out of her and covered her mouth with his own, he thought about how wonderful it was to love someone and have them love you in return. When he'd first begun things with her he had just intended to use her. But as they spent time together he slowly realized that she really did love him, and he began to fall in love with her as well. Being with his beloved Hinachan brought him immense joy and he wanted to always keep her safe. He loved her and she was one of a very precious handful who had never hurt or betrayed him.

"Well that went well, don't you think?" Orochimaru said back in his palace. He regretfully took off his robes.

"Yes Lord Orochimaru," Kabuto answered. He was one of Orochimaru's prized agents. A brilliant medic nin and an equally effective spy. He had been recalled from Konoha to train Hinata and to help keep an eye on her and Naruto. Orochimaru trusted *no one* completely, but he was as trusted as anyone in the Otokage's service.

"Naruto-kun and his unit were as efficient as ever, there was not even a murmur from the crowd today. No one would suspect there were four ninja out there eager to blow themselves up."

"Naruto is most definitely formidable, Lord Orochimaru." Kabuto said. "Formidable and very independent minded."

Orochimaru grinned at his agent's subtle hints. "Have you seen something that warrants my concern?"

"Nothing blatant," Kabuto stated. "He never says anything even remotely treasonous and has not committed any acts that would *appear* threatening."

Orochimaru waited and invited him to continue.

"Some of his jokes are a tad disrespectful, and he is very close to the members of the Sound Seven. Some might question who they're loyalty belongs to."

"That has been the case for some time now," Orochimaru said. "He is unique among all of my servants. Too valuable to be killed, yet too strong willed to be fully controlled. I had hoped to make him love me; unfortunately we are not quite that close. However the measures I have in place seem effective. He *is* loyal."

"Or at least he seems to be," Kabuto added.

"He has gained a great deal from serving me; he knows how much he stands to lose should he ever turn against me." He laughed softly. "And I *do* have the 'heart seal' as a final measure."

Among the many seals on Naruto's body was one he had placed over his heart. If a specific set of hand signs and code words were spoken Naruto's heart would be shredded, killing him instantly. It could not be used to inflict pain, if activated it would kill, that was its sole function. Orochimaru alone knew the activation jutsu and Kabuto was the only other person to even know of the seal's existence. Orochimaru had deliberately kept the seal's real purpose a secret from Naruto. He wanted to earn Naruto's genuine affection, and knowing he'd placed such a lethal thing on him would ruin that and likely set the shinobi to plotting. He preferred to rely on other more subtle methods to keep Naruto in line.

The heart seal was an insurance policy against Naruto ever turning on him.

"Even so, what you have in mind, the mission to Akido, isn't it a risk?" Kabuto asked.

"Ku, ku, ku of course it is, but one well worth taking. Do you think he would betray me? Given what would happen if he did?"

"Probably not," Kabuto answered slowly. "But he might be sorely tempted to."

"You overestimate his old loyalties," Orochimaru said. "Those did not prevent him from abandoning his village. They will not matter to him now."

"They will matter," Kabuto said. "The question is only how much."

"The risk is worth taking," Orochimaru said with a laugh. "After all, I have not given up my interest in acquiring the sharingan."

Falling asleep in bed beside his wife Naruto entered the dreamscape.

As usual he was in an empty lifeless wasteland. The blackened ruins of Konoha lay all around him. Above him all the faces on the Hokage monument had been blasted away *except* for Sarutobi's. The night he'd left the leaf he had blown it up as a signal to the old man that they were now enemies. Now he liked having the old man's stern face looking down at what he had caused.

"Damn you brat," a bitter voice called out. "Release me."

Naruto looked over to the only other living being in this place. What his eyes saw was a plain red fox with nine bushy tails. He was crammed in a small steel cage no more than two feet high and wide. Every paw and tail had an iron shackle and heavy steel chin holding it in place. The fox's mouth was muzzled (though that didn't keep him from communicating) and the cage itself was coated in paper seals.

Naruto tapped his lips as though thinking it over. "Uh... no!"

The fox growled in impotent rage. "I am already bound within you! There is no need for all these additional restraints! Have you forgotten who aided you when you decided to acquire real power?"

"I haven't forgotten who it was that had me believing I really was the Kyuubi for awhile." Naruto was still embarrassed at how easily he'd been duped back then. "I'm sure if I let you out of your cage you'd be eager to help me."

"We share the same fate! Naturally I would help!"

Naruto laughed. "Wrong! Your fate is to be nothing but a battery! I'll take you power and your knowledge but I won't ever listen to your lies again."

"You are still nothing but a child!" He looked about at the ruins. "You still have a child's longing for revenge. You still ache to hurt those who wounded you... especially the old man."

"Shut up," Naruto said darkly.

The fox merely chuckled. "Oh, did I strike a nerve? Don't forget I have seen through your eyes and I know your thoughts. It's not the village's wrongs you want to avenge near so much as Sarutobi's betrayal. What you truly want is to hurt him."

"Like I care about that!" Naruto snapped. "Who cares what the stupid old man thinks?"

The fox looked up at the monument. "I'd say you care quite a bit."

"You don't know what you're talking about." The forbidden scroll suddenly appeared before him. He had learned all of its techniques save for one. "Now be quiet while I study."

The fox continued to torment him as much as he could while Naruto tried to learn the secrets of the Hirashin no Jutsu.

A few days later in Konoha the Third Hokage stared at a handful of reports from agents in Oto. Among the many civilians who had rushed to the new village to find work were a dozen Leaf spies. All of them were kept ignorant of the others. They were ordinary people, not ninja, and were there just to send general observations about the village. Sarutobi knew quite well what the ordinary citizen of Oto did. What he lacked was intelligence about Orochimaru and Naruto and the plans they had in store.

What he was reading right now were accounts of the celebration of Oto's founding as a great power and the proclamation of the Otokage. What made him so unhappy was that it had gone so smoothly. None of the reports mentioned any kind of disturbance or even a rumor of danger. The assassination squads had failed to even be a nuisance.

What also worried him were mentions of the Tsuchikage walking the parade route beside Orochimaru. Iwa had been the main enemy back during the Third great Ninja War and the bitter feelings of that

struggle still lingered. If Konoha's old enemy drew together with her current one...

He sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. "I am too old for this," he muttered wearily. He had retired long ago. By all rights he should still have been retired and spending time with his grandson and painting. In an ideal world the village would be in Minato's capable hands and Orochimaru and Naruto would be loyal leaf ninja doing their duty for the village.

But the world remained anything but ideal.

Minato had been dead fifteen years and Orochimaru and Naruto were the greatest possible threats to Konoha's survival. He had been responsible for both of them, and until they were dealt with he did not feel he could honorably step down.

The speaker on his desk buzzed. "Lord Hokage," his secretary said. "Uchiha Sasuke and Hatake Kakashi are both here for their appointment."

"Send them in," the Hokage said. The time had finally come to make a serious effort against Oto. Operation Orange would soon begin.

Act of betrayal

The door to the Hokage's office opened and two ANBU entered, one with a dog mask and one with a raven's. They both removed their masks once the door was shut and they were alone with their Hokage. Alone among all the ninja of the village Sasuke and Kakashi still pleaded Naruto's case and argued for his return. After all the death and destruction Naruto had inflicted on Konoha their arguments were less than popular. Had they not been elite ninja they likely would have been brought up on charges of light treason.

In particular Shikamaru and Danzo were vehemently opposed to Naruto's return. Danzo had once believed Naruto could be harnessed as a living weapon in the service of the village. After his defection and the slaughter at the Valley of the End Danzo felt Naruto would never be completely trustworthy. He loudly criticized the Third for not having given him over to the ANBU for indoctrination from the start. He claimed that if that had been the case Naruto would now be a loyal and unquestioning servant of Konoha. As it was now he felt that any weapon that could not be safely used should be scrapped. Danzo believed the only safe course now was killing Naruto by any means necessary.

Shikamaru just wanted to avenge his father, plain and simple.

It was perhaps only natural that after making Jonin and being enrolled in the ANBU at age 13 that Danzo would recruit him into Root. Together they led the faction (everyone but Sasuke and Kakashi really) who wanted Naruto killed.

Sarutobi had acted in accordance with this, if he hadn't he would have been overthrown. And truthfully he felt it the best course despite his own feelings for Naruto. But after three years of mounting failure certain elements within the village were beginning to believe killing him was impossible and that something else should be tried. Not because they had forgiven Naruto or changed their opinion

about him. Almost the whole village felt what happened the night he betrayed them was the 'real' Naruto finally coming out into the open. The fact he was the Yondaime's son was now generally known but most people vehemently refused to believe it. The ones who did simply pointed to the obvious truth that the demon inside him had overpowered whatever nobility might have been there.

People who were willing to now consider a different alternative did so for the practical reason that assassination had failed. Whatever the reason this slight change had given Sarutobi just enough leeway to try something.

"Is the mission a go?" Sasuke asked eagerly. He still believed in his friend and wanted desperately to pull him out of his darkness.

The Hokage slowly nodded. Over the last six months there had been a highly secretive correspondence going on between Sasuke and Naruto. Coded messages had been snuck into Oto and placed in Naruto's hands. Disguised replies had been taken out and delivered here to Konoha. Over the last half year both of them had carefully felt out the other and had at last agreed to meet in the city of Akido in four days time. They would have a face to face meeting where Sasuke would finally get his chance to bring Naruto back.

"Here," the Hokage handed over a sealed envelope. "Within that is a full pardon for all the crimes he has committed up to this point, it bears my signature and seal. There is also a letter of commission restoring his status as a leaf ninja and granting him the rank of Jonin. If you can convince him to return to the village of his own free will I will do everything possible to right the past wrongs and give him a place here."

Sasuke nodded and made the letter disappear. "I will definitely convince him. I know if I can just talk to him I can bring him back."

"We will certainly do all that we can," Kakashi said. For him trying to save Naruto was a debt he owed to his former sensei. Even if he

died in the effort he had to do everything he could to bring his beloved sensei's son home again.

The Hokage looked like the very old man that he was. He did not know how much time was left to him and he desperately wanted to repair the mistakes of his past. He was not sure that it was possible. "You realize Sasuke that all this may be nothing but a trap? It is very likely that Naruto's only intention in agreeing to meet with you is to kill or capture you."

"Yes, I know that," Sasuke acknowledged. "But even with the risk I have to go, and I do believe he is serious about wanting to talk to me. The night he left, the last time we saw each other, the dobe told me he would always be my friend. I believe him."

"Some would call that being naïve," Sarutobi said. "Putting your faith in something he said so long ago."

"Naruto was always one to keep his promises," Sasuke stated. "I have faith in him."

"Well you will have the chance to see if that faith is warranted," The Hokage said. "You will leave tomorrow morning for Akido. Obviously this mission has a ranking above S and must be kept absolutely secret. Should anyone learn of this the results would be disastrous."

Sasuke and Kakashi both nodded.

After the two of them parted ways Sasuke headed back to his apartment. When he got there his girlfriend was in the kitchen already making dinner.

"I'm home," he called out.

"Welcome back Sasuke-kun," Sakura came out to greet him with a warm kiss.

In the three years since Naruto's departure team seven had been dissolved with Kakashi and Sasuke entering the ANBU while Sakura remained a Genin serving wherever she was needed. She had a bit of talent with genjutsu but was not an especially effective field operative. These days most of her missions were in a support role within the village itself.

Over that time she and Sasuke had drawn closer as she was the only woman he felt he could really talk to, eventually their friendship had become something more. She had actually achieved her long cherished dream of becoming Sasuke's girl.

As with most dreams the reality was not *quite* what she'd expected. Given their busy schedules they did not see each other as much as they would have liked. Since becoming an ANBU captain Sasuke had been given many dangerous assignments that took him far from the village for long stretches. Sakura would always fear the worst and miss him terribly. She was always hugely relieved whenever he came back to her. She was still completely devoted to him and loved him desperately.

Sasuke's feelings for her were just a little more indistinct, he definitely cared for her and they were lovers. But he never professed to be in love with her, and while she obviously mattered to him she knew his work came first.

Especially his plans to save Naruto.

At the very beginning she had also been loudly supportive of the idea. He was her teammate as well and she cared about him and respected him. She told people he had been driven out and deserved a chance to return.

Unlike Kakashi and Sasuke though, she was not a special talent. She was just another Genin. So when she talked in public about Naruto she was quickly slapped down by others. She soon began keeping her opinions to herself as she did not like drawing so much hostility. And while Sasuke and Kakashi had good things to say

about him she would hear the other side from everyone else. People would talk about friends and relatives lost the night he abandoned the village or at the Valley of the End. She heard about the Kyuubi and about the horrors it would bring. She heard about the things he was doing in Oto, dark rumors that made her blood run cold. Bit by bit she began to think that maybe Naruto was never the good guy she had thought.

She had her own memories that made her wonder, feeling the demonic from him that first time during the mission to Hikedo, seeing him torture that rain nin during the exams, seeing his full power at the finals as he proclaimed he was the Kyuubi. Yes, maybe he was never really the good guy to begin with.

Sasuke still believed though.

"I'm going to meet him," he said after her welcoming kiss.

"Meet who?"

He grinned. "Our former teammate."

She stared at him in shock. Naturally she'd been told nothing at all about the secret correspondence and so had no idea that meeting Naruto, outside of battle, was even possible. She had known that trying to convince Sasuke to give up his dreams of saving him would drive them apart, so she had deliberately kept her true feelings to herself. That made things easier and she didn't think it would ever matter. She could not imagine a mission where he would actually meet with Naruto. "How... how is this even possible?"

"I can't tell you the details," Sasuke answered. "Really I shouldn't have told you even this much, but I know you want him back too. You can't say a word to anyone; this is all under S-rank secrecy."

"Of course," she replied with a weak smile. "When are you leaving to find him?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Sasuke," she began hesitantly. "Do you... do you really think it's a good idea? What if he turns on you?"

Sasuke frowned at her and quickly dismissed the notion. "I'm sure that won't happen," he said. "I'm sure the dobe will at least give me a chance to talk to him."

"Even if he does, what if he doesn't like what you have to say?" She asked worriedly. The image of Naruto tearing apart Gaara flashed through her mind.

"Even if there's a danger I have to try," Sasuke said. "So what's for dinner?" The question was clearly meant to end talk on the subject.

She got the hint and did not bring it up again.

As she headed home her mind was filled with panicked images of Naruto surrounded by demonic chakra and proclaiming himself Kyuubi. She knew Sasuke was the best, but just how many leaf Jonin had Naruto already killed? Would Sasuke-kun really be safe? What scared her the most was the fact she knew that no matter how strong Sasuke might be there was no way he could match Naruto in full demon mode. Sasuke-kun's safety was the only thing that really mattered to her. She would do anything to keep him safe.

Even betray him.

Changing direction she headed away from her home and towards another destination.

"I see," Nara Shikamaru said calmly. He took out eh cigarette and flicked some ashes into a cup. He had picked up the habit from his old sensei and it helped calm him. "Well thank you for telling me this, I promise you we'll take care of things."

"I don't usually reveal S-rank secrets," she said quickly. That was a crime punishable by imprisonment and hard labor or by death. "I'm only doing it now to protect Sasuke-kun."

"Nice to know some things never change," he said under his breath. "You did the right thing bringing this to me Sakura. We'll take care of Naruto and I promise we'll try and keep Sasuke safe."

"By 'we' you mean the ANBU, right? Just what will you do?"

"It's better if you don't know," he told her as he stamped out his cigarette and then lit a fresh one. "Just have faith it will be taken care of."

She nodded. "So long as Sasuke-kun is all right that's all I care about."

Shika nodded but didn't actually say anything more.

"Treason," Danzo said darkly. "It's nothing less than treason against the village. Sarutobi has finally gone too far."

"Before you worry about that shouldn't we make plans to deal with Naruto?" Shikamaru asked. "We know Sasuke is leaving tomorrow morning but we have no idea when or where this meeting is scheduled for."

"I'll have him followed, go ahead and assemble your team and have them ready. You will be part of the strike force."

Shikamaru nodded. "Whoever follows him if they're spotted Sasuke will scrub the mission. I'm sure he'd rather do that than put his good friend at risk."

"Don't worry about that I have several very experienced ninja who are experts at trailing ninja while remaining unobserved. Now go and prepare, there isn't much time."

Shikamaru left the secret Root meeting room to get Chouji, Ino, and Asuma ready.

Danzo had always been a careful man who did not take needless risks. That was the main reason he was still alive at his advanced age. He reconfirmed he was alone and unmonitored before running through a long and complex series of hand signs.

At last an astral image appeared of a figure wearing a robe and with the rinnegan eyes.

"You have news?" Pein demanded.

"I do," Danzo replied. He had also survived to old age by knowing how to make deals to achieve his objectives.

The following morning in Oto Naruto was having a last private meeting with the Otokage before setting out for Akido with the Sound Seven.

"You know what I want Naruto-kun," Orochimaru said with a simpering eagerness. "The time for me to take a new body is drawing near. This is the ideal chance for me to at last acquire the sharingan."

"Yeah, I know. I'll definitely bring you back Sasuke, or at the very least I'll bring back his eyes."

"His eyes would be useful," Orochimaru admitted. "I could always have them implanted. But their value is nothing compared to what having him brought here to me alive would be worth."

Naruto grinned mischievously. "You know, having Hinata with me would sure make things easier."

Orochimaru had a sad look as she shook his head. "I am terribly sorry Naruto-kun, but Kabuto and the hospital simply cannot spare

her."

"Funny how the only times you can spare her for missions are when you can't spare me. You know if I didn't know any better it's almost like you're keeping her as a hostage to guarantee my good behavior."

"Such mistrustful words wound me deeply Naruto-kun," Orochimaru sighed. "You know how I trust you."

Naruto smiled at him cheerfully. "Oh, I trust you the same way Otokage-sama," he made a quick gesture with one finger on his jacket. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

Hiatus

Hello everyone. This is to inform all my readers that I am placing all my stories on hiatus until at **least** the end of the year. I am very sorry but I have no real choice. I am a senior accounting student at the University of South Florida and am gearing up for my finals and trying to graduate with my BA. After which I have lots of other things I need to deal with, not least of which is trying to find a good job in this economy.

I absolutely **love** writing. I love reading your reviews and messages, except when they smell of napalm of course. And while I write for myself please be assured I have always been amazed and honored to see so many people putting my stories on their favorites and alert lists. It has been a very great pleasure writing all these stories, and it has made me extremely happy to know how many of you honestly enjoyed what I wrote.

I thank you all.

But it's because I love writing so much that I have to stop for awhile. My writing has become my addiction and my keyboard my escape from the world's problems. So I need to walk away for awhile and put all my energies and time into real life problems.

I still plan on coming back as I love writing too much to ever stop for good and I don't want to leave my stories unfinished. This is not goodbye, just so long for now.

LOTLOF

An old friend and sensei

Author's Note: To all my readers, I will once again be updating my stories. However from this point on I expect my updates will come at a slower rate as I have less free time these days. While I really do appreciate all of you who have taken the time to read my work I ask that people not leave reviews or send me PMs simply to ask me to update a particular story. I'll remind everyone that this is a hobby for me and not my profession; I don't have deadlines for anything I post here. I do promise to try and finish everything I have written, I just don't know how long that will take.

Akido was a medium sized city in Iron country. It was one of those new industrial centers that were beginning to drive the old fashioned guilds into extinction. Here they took the plentiful iron ore and coal deposits this land was famous for and turned them into steel. Huge brick factories with massive smokestacks hundreds of feet high pour black smoke into the air day and night. It was a dirty crowded place where everything was coated in a thin layer of dust and soot. Even the people here seemed perpetually dirty and stained. Most of them were the workers who trudged in and out of the factories working their ten or twelve hour shifts in stifling heat and in constant danger of being maimed or burned. No one cared if one of them had an arm torn off by a press or if they slipped and fell into a vat of molten iron. Iron Country had an abundance of poor unskilled workers.

Most of the people here wore the cheapest and plainest of grey wool and went through their daily lives with constant apathy and weariness. They lived hard lives and seemed to have no energy to spare for greetings or warm words.

So when they saw a man in bright orange strolling down one of their crowded streets he drew a lot of attention. His hitai-ite with a musical note stamped into it and the pouches and weapons he wore along his belt all screamed that he was a ninja. That was a rarity in Iron

Country where samurai enforced their Daimyo's will. No one in Akido could remember ever seeing one in their village before.

"Hi there!" The blond ninja greeted a group of weary workers trudging home with a cheerful wave. Their blank stares only made him smile even wider.

Sasuke had recommended Akido because it was one of those out of the way places that people never had any reason to visit. It was far enough away from both Fire and Rice country to give them a decent chance of maintaining secrecy at least until the meeting took place.

Naruto was in a fine mood despite the grey and tainted surroundings. He was going to meet an old friend and an old sensei again. He was honestly looking forward to it. He really wanted a chance to talk honestly with Sasuke and Kakashi before the fighting started.

When he entered the crowded bar called the 'Iron Spigot' he had no problem spotting them. Sasuke and Kakashi were alone at a table right in the middle of the place. Kakashi looked exactly the way Naruto remembered him with his Jonin vest and leaf hitai-ite over one eye. Sasuke had grown up some of course but he also looked much the same. He had on a dark blue jacket with the Uchiha fan symbol emblazoned on the back. In their coded messages they had agreed to meet out in the open, no henges, no disguises, and no clones.

As Naruto cheerfully waved to them and strolled over he wondered how much time they would have before the *real* show began.

Sasuke and Kakashi both got to their feet.

"It's good to see you again Naruto," Sasuke said and held out his hand.

Naruto took it and shook it without hesitation. "It's good to see you too teme. And you too Kakashi-sensei." He also shook hands with his old sensei.

"I honestly wasn't sure you'd come Naruto," Kakashi said as all three of them took their seats.

"How could I not?" He asked with a grin.

Sasuke looked at his former teammate intently. He was honestly surprised to see he still had the exact same goofy smile he'd had all through the academy. After what he'd done at the Valley of the End and to all the assassin squads that had gone after him since he'd half expected to find an evil malevolent aura enveloping him. To most everyone in Konoha he, not Itachi, not Orochimaru, was the number one enemy. The civilians talked about him in hushed whispers, like he really was the Devil himself. The entire village was living under the shadow of what he might do one day.

Yet Naruto didn't look to have really changed any. Sure, he was older now and no longer a child, but he still had that same carefree attitude that had always marked him.

"How's Hinata doing?" Sasuke asked.

"She's fine," Naruto told him. "You know she and I are married now. She's a hell of a medic nin and a great woman, you should try her baked salmon some time, it's great."

"You know Naruto the village and the Hyuuga don't recognize that marriage as legitimate," Kakashi said carefully. "So far as they're concerned she'd still a prisoner being held against her will."

"Just because the village won't recognize something doesn't mean it's so." Naruto answered with a knowing grin. "They don't admit I'm the Fourth's kid either, do they?"

"No they don't," Kakashi said unhappily. Though Naruto's parentage had ceased being a secret most people vehemently refused to believe it.

At least inside Konoha.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I mean who would want to admit that their precious Yellow Flash produced a monster like me?"

"You're not a monster dobe," Sasuke told him sounding annoyed. "You're an idiot and a dead last, but you're no monster."

"Hah! I bet you and Kakashi are the only ones in the village who think that!"

"The Hokage also feels that way Naruto," Kakashi said. "We wouldn't be here now if he didn't."

Naruto glanced at his sensei and did not respond.

"Why'd you do it dobe?" Sasuke asked quietly.

There was no need to explain what 'it' was.

"I did it because the old man betrayed me," Naruto said. "All I ever wanted was to become a powerful ninja like him and make him proud. And then when I finally proved myself he decided to leash me. What would *you* have done teme?"

"I don't know," Sasuke answered truthfully. "But I would never have turned on the village."

"Well... everyone always liked you." Naruto couldn't keep just the slightest twinge of jealousy out of his voice. "You know I'm a Lord now? Up in sound I'm recognized as head of a clan and as the second most powerful man in the whole country behind the Otokage."

"The village doesn't recognize your status as either a nobleman or a clan head either," Kakashi said with a sigh.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Naruto," Sasuke spoke. "Do you remember promising me we would always be friends that night? Did you mean it?"

Naruto nodded. "Sure I remember, and yeah, I meant it Sasuke. It was a promise and you know I never go back on my word."

"Did you know what you were going to do that night? Did you already know you were going to betray the village?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Then why did you say we would always be friends?"

"Oh come on teme, you already know the answer to that. You can be friends with someone even when you're enemies too. Didn't that describe us back at the start with team seven?"

Sasuke gave him a slight smile. "Not really, I didn't think of you as a friend back then."

Naruto made a face and mimed getting stabbed. "Ouch! That's pretty mean."

Still smiling Sasuke took out the Hokage's documents and laid them on the table. "Here are the papers guaranteeing your pardon for all crimes committed up until now and making you a Jonin of the Leaf. It's just as I promised you, if you come with us right now you can return to the village and have a fresh start."

"A fresh start," Naruto repeated and picked the papers up to leaf through them. "Everything will just be forgotten huh? The villagers will take me back with open arms? The Hyuuga and the others will pat me on the back and welcome me home?" He didn't look too

closely at the papers in his hands. He did note the signature and seal looked genuine.

"It might not be perfect, but at least you could come home again," Sasuke said.

"Oh I'll come home again," Naruto said. "When I have nine tails and I'm ready to burn the damn place to the ground."

With leisurely ease he tore the documents in his hands in half and then into quarters.

Kakashi and Sasuke both stiffened in their seats, Kakashi lifted his hitai-ite to reveal his sharingan and also placed a hand on a kunai ready to draw it. Sasuke deliberately kept both his hands on the table as a show of good faith and trust in his friend.

"Are you planning to betray us Naruto? We came here in good faith." Sasuke said keeping his voice calm despite his rising anger.

"Come on Sasuke, who are you kidding? We both know all of this was just a game from the very start. Me come back and serve Konoha again? After what I did? I mean I know I used to be the dead last but even I'm not *that* stupid."

"The offer from the Hokage was real Naruto," Kakashi insisted.

Naruto gave his sensei a cold smile that had no warmth or humor in it at all. When Sasuke saw it he found it easier to believe the stories he'd heard.

"So you and Sasuke didn't come here to try and kill me?"

"We didn't," Kakashi insisted.

"Then why are Shikamaru, Ino, and Chouji here too?"

Before anyone could reply a shadow raced across the dirty floor and merged with Naruto's. There were three slight puffs of smoke as the

three ANBU dropped their disguises.

"Pretty good Naruto," Shikamaru's voice said from behind an ANBU mask with a deer on it. "Our disguises were good enough to get past Kakashi but not you." As Shikamaru got up from the bar stool he was on Naruto was compelled to get up from his seat.

Sasuke and Kakashi had also gotten to their feet. The regular patrons suddenly got the feeling that it might be a good time to leave and began to stampede out the door.

"Shikamaru! What the hell are you doing here?!" Sasuke demanded.

"What does it look like?" Chouji said angrily behind his butterfly mask. "We're here to deal with Naruto once and for all."

"Why are you bothering to pretend you're surprised?" Naruto asked. "I knew from the very start how this would go."

Sasuke turned to Naruto. "I swear to you I didn't know they would be here. Kakashi and I really were trying to bring you back home."

"Sure you were," Naruto said.

"Actually that's true," Shikamaru admitted. "We only found out about this because Sakura told us."

"Sakura told you?" Sasuke said disbelieving. "I don't believe you! She wants to save Naruto as much as I do!"

"No," Ino spoke from behind a mask of a boar. "She wanted to make you happy so she pretended to want that. The truth is she gave up on him a long time ago Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke looked shocked. He felt betrayed by one of the very few people he had come to trust.

"You really didn't know?" Naruto sounded surprised. "They're not the only ones; there are at least ten more ninja in this village. I'm willing

to bet they're all ANBU. I knew it was a trap before I ever stepped foot in this place."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I was going to betray you too," Naruto said. He did not sound embarrassed or ashamed. He was just relaying a fact. "The Otokage wants me to deliver you to him; your body is going to serve as his next host."

"You're quite a guy a Naruto," Shikamaru said. "You'd sell out someone who really wanted to help you."

"Don't sound too high and mighty Shika, my safety at this meeting was *supposed* to be guaranteed by the old man. You and the others being here violated that the second you arrived. Even if it turns out Sasuke and Kakashi didn't know I as the one who was betrayed first."

"I don't want to hear anything like that from the worst traitor in the history of the leaf village. This is for my father and Chouji's father and for every other ninja and civilian of Konoha you've killed. **Kage Kubi Shibari no Jutsu.** "

A hand of shadow made its way up from the floor snaking its way about Naruto's body as it headed for his neck.

As the hand grasped Naruto's throat it was pushed back by red chakra that began to pour out of it and the rest of Naruto's body. Shikamaru grunted as his shadow was forcibly expelled.

In a heartbeat Naruto was surrounded by a red chakra cloak with three tails swirling about. His eyes had changed from blue to red with slitted pupils. He had fangs and claws and looked more than a little demonic. Deciding to show them a little something he activated his first level curse seal.

Black splotches covered his face, he grunted him pain as his mouth and jaw grew out and his eyes set further back giving his face an animalistic look. His jacket and sleeve split open as his muscles expanded and became coated in thick red fur. The other ninja took a step back as he became a real monster.

"Oh come on," Naruto laughed in a husky not quite human voice.
"You didn't *really* think it would be that easy did you?"

That was when things went from bad to worse.

Fall

The instant Naruto activated his seal and released some of the Kyuubi's chakra every ninja in the city of Akido knew it. Beneath the bandages that covered his face Zabuza chuckled.

"Looks like Naruto's cutting loose, heh, good times."

The other members of the Sound Seven nodded.

"Are we really not going to assist Naruto-sama?" Haku asked.

"What? You think Naruto needs our fucking help to deal with those shitheads?" Tayuya replied.

"We just need to take care of the other Leaf nin and keep them from spoiling his fun," Sakon said.

On the nearby roof tops they spotted flashes of sudden movement heading towards the bar.

As one they all activated their curse seals. There was no need for subtlety now.

Zabuza laughed as he felt the raw energy course through him. Black lines covered his face and hands. With such power filling him he really did feel like a demon. "Time to party," he said and drew his sword.

"Have fun," Sakon reminded them. "But remember to not let any of them get in Naruto's way."

The six of them vanished to intercept their various targets.

Ino ran through some hand signs and put her fingers " **Shintenshin no Jutsu**. " She had been afraid he would move too quickly for her

to catch. But fortunately he had remained in place long enough. Despite his powers her clan techniques should have allowed her to switch places with him, giving her temporary control of his body. That was what *should* have happened.

"Nothing happened!" Ino cried in surprise.

The monstrous thing that was now Naruto looked at her. The pointed teeth in his snout became a hideous smile. "Awwwww, sorry Ino-chan but that won't work on me." The seals that were now hidden beneath his fur shielded him from all genjutsu, possession, or mind effecting techniques. "By the way, did I ever tell you that you were always really, really annoying?"

Ino opened her mouth to reply but never got the chance.

Naruto moved so fast he seemed to teleport from the middle of the common room to right in front of her. It took just a swipe of his claws to rip her head from her neck and send it flying across the room.

Blood gushed up out of her torn open throat. Her body continued standing for just a moment, and then collapsed at Naruto's feet.

" **INO!!**" Shikamaru and Chouji screamed.

Naruto looked at them. "See? She's much less annoying now."

Chouji howled a wordless scream and ran at him. His arms grew to five times their normal size and hit him a series of blows that would have shattered boulders or torn down the walls around them.

Naruto stood there and allowed him to hit him. He didn't even take a step back.

"That all you got fatty?" Naruto grinned down at him. He then delivered a punch of his own. His fist and arm went clean through Chouji's armor and chest and out his back, literally ripping out his heart.

Shikamaru stood there horrified as his two dearest friends and teammates had just been slaughtered right before his eyes.

"So are you *really* supposed to be a genius?" Naruto asked as he casually tossed aside Chouji's bleeding corpse. "You seem like the same lazy idiot that I remember."

"Damn you," Shikamaru cursed. "This isn't the way this was supposed to work out! We were supposed to avenge our fathers!"

"Shika you don't know the first thing about revenge." Naruto said. He was about to deal with him when the sound of chirping birds filled the bar.

"Naruto!" Sasuke called out. His sharingan was active as was Kakashi's. They were on either side of him with chidoris in their palms. "I'm sorry; I didn't want it to come to this! I really did want you to come home! But I guess it's too late."

"It's been too late for a long time now." Naruto said.

As one both Kakashi and Sasuke ran at him, one aiming for the front and one for his back. They would rely on their sharingans to avoid any possible counter and deliver their attacks.

The red chakra cloak that surrounded him shot out two clawed hands at each. Both Sasuke and Kakashi were startled to see that their sharingans could not show them how to avoid the Kyuubi's chakra. Both ninja were caught and then slammed through the walls of the bar. Not only were they sent through the bar's walls they went flying through the street to slam into the adjacent buildings. Both were left in bloody heaps unconscious.

"Now then, where were we?" He turned back to Shikamaru to find he was gone. "Heh, I guess he has some sense after all."

The members of his squad met him outside the now ruined and bloody bar. Naruto was back to his normal self. Since his clothes were ruined he worked a henge so as to appear fully dressed and to hide his seals.

"All the other ninja are dead," Zabuza informed him.

Naruto nodded.

"These two are still alive," Sakon told him. "Do you want us to fix that?"

"No," Naruto said. "The whole point of this was to bring Sasuke back for the Otokage. I held back on purpose."

"What about the other one?" Sakon asked.

"I think I'll let Kakashi-sensei live, he always annoyed me with his being late but I liked him and he was a good sensei. In his own way." Naruto was sure that Shikamaru had managed to escape as well. That was fine. He could live with the pain of knowing he had caused the deaths of Ino and Chouji while failing to get the revenge he wanted so badly. "Haku?"

"Yes Naruto-sama?"

"I don't mind sparing Kakashi, but I don't think I'll let Konoha keep even one sharingan anymore. Can you take care of that for me?"

Haku nodded. While not actually a medic nin he was an expert on anatomy and had fine chakra control. He drew out a kunai and nodded. "I will remove it Naruto-sama."

Naruto grinned. The first part of his plan had gone through without a hitch.

Sarutobi was in his office trying to handle the never ending paperwork when the doors opened. He was surprised to see Danzo entering along with Aburame Shibi, Hyuuga Hanabi, Inuzuka Hana, and many of the other clan heads and leading ninja of the village. At his side was Nara Shikamaru dressed in ANBU cloak and armor. As soon as he saw them and the anger on their faces he knew.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sarutobi demanded. Perhaps if some of the clan heads were still in doubt he could intimidate them.

It didn't work.

"We have come here to demand your immediate resignation and retirement from public life," Danzo told him flatly. "If you refuse we will arrest you on charges of high treason."

"Treason? That is a very serious charge," Sarutobi said. "I assume you have some evidence?"

Shikamaru stepped forward. His eyes were lifeless and his voice ashen, but he still spoke loudly and clearly. "You sent Sasuke and Kakashi to the city of Akido to meet with the traitor Uzumaki Naruto and offer him a pardon for his crimes. To invite the Kyuubi back to this village without even discussing it with the clans was treason. And you might want to know that Sasuke was captured and Kakashi is in the hospital right now recovering from his wounds. His sharingan was removed."

The angry looks on the other ninja grew darker. Only Danzo and Shikamaru remained perfectly neutral.

"How could you do that?!" Inuzuka Hana demanded hotly. She had lost her mother at the Valley of the End. Like Shikamaru she would never forgive. "Because of you we've lost Sasuke and the sharingan! What were you thinking?"

"You would have pardoned the man who killed my father and kidnapped by older sister?" Hanabi asked in that cool superior

Hyuuga manner. She too would never forgive. "The man who inflicted such wounds on the Hyuuga? To have offered him a pardon was unthinkable and unforgivable."

"I acted within the limits of my authority as Hokage," Sarutobi told them. He knew it was pointless but he would still defend himself. "I did what I thought best for the village."

"By inviting the Kyuubi back into our midst?" Hana demanded. "How was that for the best?!"

"I am forced to concur," Aburame Shibi said in a monotone. "Naruto's actions over the past three years have made it clear he views us as the enemy. I fail to see how this course of action could possibly have worked."

"Wouldn't it have been better to have had him as an ally rather than as an enemy?" Sarutobi asked.

"It would have been better to have had him as a *tool*," Danzo said. "Had you listened to me long ago he would be serving this village and be completely trustworthy."

"You mean he would have been reduced to a mindless follower of yours," Sarutobi said. "Like so many others in Root. He never would have had a chance at any sort of normal life."

"And so?" Danzo asked coldly. "Some must make sacrifices for the greater good. A ninja village cannot survive otherwise. Do not pretend to be ignorant of that fact."

"Our ninja choose to serve," Sarutobi said solemnly. "Naruto would never have been allowed to choose. I felt that the village owed at least that much to the Yondaime's one and only son."

A slight murmur of discontent ran through the clan heads and other ninja. Some of them vehemently refused to believe Naruto was the

Yondaime's child. Even those who did know the truth disliked being reminded of it.

Danzo was unmoved. "Whatever your reasons they led to the current situation. Because of your actions the last true Uchiha has been lost. The sharingan has been lost; its power now belongs to Oto and Orochimaru. *Another* traitor who you allowed to turn on us. It is obvious you are no longer fit to lead the village. Should the truth of what happened get out however it will severely damage Konoha, both internally and in our realtions with the other villages. Most ninja, both inside and outside of Konoha, still view you as a legend. Your trial and execution would destroy that and cause only harm. Therefore, for the good of the village, I ask you to write out your resignation and step down."

Sarutobi looked at all the faces of those present. They were all united against him. If he refused he would be arrested, that was obvious. And Danzo was right; it would only serve to harm Konoha.

"Very well," he said and took out a sheet of paper and a pen.

Danzo looked on silently. He did not betray the joy he felt at his long awaited moment of triumph. It had taken almost an entire lifetime, but in the end he had won. He *would* be the next Hokage and would save the village from the mess Sarutobi had put it in.

A few days later in Oto Naruto was about to set out for a very special meeting.

"Here you are Naruto-kun," Hinata handed him a tiny vial with a green liquid inside. She looked troubled. "Are you... are you sure about this?" She asked him.

Smiling he took the vile from his wife and made it disappear. "Trust me Hinata-chan, this is for the best."

"But Sasuke is a friend!"

Still smiling he gave her a long comforting kiss. "I know, but sacrifices have to be made. You do trust me don't you Hinata-chan?"

"Of... of course I do Naruto-kun!"

He kissed her again. "Then trust me now."

She slowly nodded. "All right."

He left to go to the Tower and meet the Otokage.

It was time for the second part of his plan.

Goodbye

The ANBU who guarded the Tower of Sound stepped aside and bowed to him. He and Kabuto were the only ones permitted to enter Orochimaru's presence without being summoned. Naruto opened the doors to the Otokage's private office. He entered to find him sitting there scribbling his signature and stamping his personal seal onto a stack of papers.

"You know I wonder what all our enemies would think if they only knew the mighty Snake Sannin spent most of his time sitting behind a desk working like some grunt clerk or accountant." Naruto sat down without bothering to wait for an invitation.

Orochimaru looked up at him with an amused expression. "I can remember Sarutobi-sensei always complaining that paperwork was the bane of every Kage's existence. I admit that back then I thought he was exaggerating and that a leader could do whatever he liked. But controlling Oto includes keeping an eye on the various needs of the village. It's boring but necessary."

"When I run things I'll make a hundred clones and have them take care of all that in half an hour."

Orochimaru raised a single eyebrow. "You mean of course when you are Hokage and running Konoha one day."

"Of course," Naruto said with a grin. "How else would I mean it?"

Orochimaru gave a wary nod. "Just as I have promised you will be Hokage one day Naruto, I will give you Konoha as a reward for all your hard work and loyalty."

"That's very generous of you Orochimaru-sama." Naruto said.
"Today is the day isn't it? The day you take Sasuke's body?"

"Yessssss," Orochimaru said eagerly. "At long last I will have the power of the Uchiha; I have waited for this day. You did very well Naruto; Kabuto tells me Sasuke is in perfect health, without even a bone broken. Once I possess his body I will be truly invincible."

"Since you're so pleased do you think I could ask for one slight favor?"

In the underground cells of the Tower Kabuto was just leaving as Naruto arrived.

"Lord Naruto," Kabuto said in his usual cheerful manner. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to have a last word with one of my few old friends," Naruto said.

"Really? Does Lord Orochimaru know?"

"Naturally, you don't think I'd try talking to such an important prisoner without the Otokage's permission do you?"

"Truthfully Naruto-sama I don't know *what* you might be capable of." Only the tiniest hint of suspicion tainted the words.

"Do you object to my having the chance to say goodbye to my friend?" Naruto asked.

"Not if Lord Orochimaru does not," Kabuto said. Naruto walked past him before Kabuto spoke again. "Is that really all you're going to do?"

Naruto halted and looked back over his shoulder at the young medic nin and spy. "What else could I do?" He then continued down the gloomy hallway to the appropriate cell.

Sasuke was bound hand and foot in heavy iron chains. The walls of the cell had been especially sealed against earth or teleportation jutsus and would have been almost impossible to escape even if he could have worked them. Each hand was held firmly to the stone wall, it was impossible to bring them together to form hand signs.

Kabuto had just given him a last medical examination and had told him that Orochimaru would be coming to see him soon. When the steel door to his cell clanked and slowly swung open he expected to see the Snake Sannin standing there.

Instead he saw his old friend. The one who had betrayed him and brought him here.

Naruto shut the cell door and performed a quick jutsu to confirm they were unobserved before speaking.

"Hi Sasuke," he said in a normal tone as though they were meeting on the street.

"Hello Naruto," Sasuke also did his best to sound calm.

"I don't know if you'll believe this, but I really am very sorry that you're here now. I never wanted this for you."

"That's strange to hear since you're the one who brought me here." Sasuke said. "I suppose I deserved it though for believing you meant it when you said we would always be friends."

"I did it mean it Sasuke, then and now. I still think of you as a friend."

"If that's true then why did you betray me?"

"It was necessary to achieve my goals," Naruto said. "Orochimaru wanted your body and ordered me to collect you. And since I need Orochimaru..." He spread out his hands in a helpless gesture.

"So you betrayed me because you were ordered to?"

"Is that strange for a ninja?" Naruto answered back. "You were ANBU for awhile, what sorts of things did you do under orders? And at least I had a reason. Why did Sakura betray you?"

Sasuke's eyes lowered a bit. "I'd like to think she was trying to help me," he said. "I don't think she really thought of it as betrayal."

"So if I tell you I didn't think what I was doing was a betrayal either would that make it okay?"

"Did you come here to ask forgiveness?" Sasuke asked him. "Is that why you're here?"

"No Sasuke, I don't need forgiveness for what I've done. Not from you or anyone else."

"But don't you regret it?" Sasuke asked him. "Betraying the village and the Hokage, don't you ever wish you could go back and fix things?"

"No," Naruto said flatly. "Go back? Go back to what? To being hated? To being leashed? To having people treat me like a monster for something that wasn't even my fault?" He shook his head. "No thank you, I much prefer it here where people *respect* me and where I can be someone. Like I told you before Sasuke, it's much too late for me to go back to what I was."

"But you're in darkness Naruto," Sasuke said pleading. He knew he was doomed but as long as there was any chance at all of saving his friend he wanted to try. "Can't you see that?"

Naruto simply grinned. "Sure I am, where else would a monster like me be? I'll let the darkness be my light."

Sasuke looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you."

"It was never your job to save me Sasuke." Naruto said. "But I thank you for caring enough to at least try."

Sasuke wearily nodded. It had all been for nothing after all. "So is that it? Is that what you came here to say?"

"No," Naruto said. He looked about the cell carefully and moved closer to Sasuke. Despite his earlier jutsu he was still wary. He put his lips to Sasuke's ear and spoke in a low whisper. "You're going to die in a little bit Sasuke, I'm sorry but I can't save you. But what I can do is give you the chance to make your death mean something."

"What are you talking about?" Taking his cue from Naruto Sasuke also lowered his voice.

"I have a special slow acting poison with me," Naruto said. "It has no known cure and is almost impossible to detect even using medical jutsus. If you were to drink it, then when your body dies it'll kill Orochimaru."

Sasuke gave him a sharp look. "You want to use me to assassinate Orochimaru and become Otokage?"

"That's right."

Sasuke looked directly into his friend's face. "You really have become a complete bastard haven't you? You not only betray someone who was a friend to you but you want to use me to become a Kage."

"I am what Konoha made me," Naruto said. "What circumstances made me."

"No," Sasuke said. "You chose this path on your own. No matter how hard things might have been everything you've done was a choice."

"I wouldn't expect you to understand me," a little bitterness crept into his voice. "Even though you lost your family you still had everything I always wanted. People loved and respected you, girls chased after you; everyone was always fawning over your blood line and your talent. How could you know what it was like for me?"

"I know you had it hard Naruto, I *know* that. But you weren't alone, you had the old man looking out for you, you had me and Sakura and Kakashi and you even had a girlfriend. You were making friends; you were making a place for yourself."

"Yeah, and then Sarutobi betrayed me," he did not try to keep the bitterness from his voice now. "I won the Chunin Exams and showed him and everyone my power. I showed him the power I would have used to serve him. And what did he do? What was my reward? He refused to promote me and was going to have Jiraiya seal away my chakra!"

"Naruto you used the Kyuubi's power in front of the whole village! You deliberately killed both Neji and Gaara. How could the Hokage reward you for that?"

"What did they teach us in the academy? That we had to be ready to kill and to die. That we had to become as powerful as we possibly could. What did I do wrong?"

Sasuke could see Naruto really meant it. Even after all this time he could not see anything wrong with his actions that day.

"Enough of this," Naruto said. "It doesn't matter how we got here. What matters is I am giving you this one chance to make your death mean something. Will you take it? Or do you just want to let Orochimaru have your body?"

Sasuke weighed the choice for a moment.

"I'll do it, but only if you'll promise to do one thing for me."

"You want me to kill Itachi for you?" Naruto asked.

"No," Sasuke said taking Naruto by surprise. "Promise me that if I do this for you you'll spare Konoha."

"Spare Konoha? Hell no, I'll burn the damn place to the ground. Ask for something else."

"If you won't make that promise I won't do it."

Naruto glared at him. Sasuke looked right back, he had nothing left to fear.

"I won't spare them," Naruto said. "But I'll do this much; when the time comes I'll give them one chance to surrender to me. I'll let anyone who surrenders and pledges fealty to me live. That's as far as I'll go."

"That's not good enough," Sasuke said.

Naruto's sharp hearing heard footsteps approaching from the hallway.

"He's coming!" Naruto hissed and produced the vial in his hand. "There's no time! Take what you can get Sasuke!"

He eyed the vial. "Promise then, swear it, you'll spare anyone from Konoha who surrenders to you and swears to serve you."

"I swear it," Naruto said hastily. "It's a promise of a lifetime."

"Then give me the poison."

Naruto swiftly unstoppered the vial and put it to Sasuke's lips. He swallowed it down in a single gulp. Naruto made the vial disappear just as the cell door opened and Orochimaru entered with Kabuto right behind him.

"Ku, ku, ku sorry to interrupt," Orochimaru said jovially. "But the time has finally arrived."

"That's all right," Naruto said calmly. "I've said what I needed to." He gave his friend a last look. "Goodbye Sasuke."

"Goodbye Naruto."

Naruto then silently exited the cell.

When he was gone Orochimaru ordered Kabuto to perform a last physical examination. The medic nin used his diagnostic jutsus to check every aspect of Sasuke's body.

He pronounced him perfectly healthy.

Well satisfied Orochimaru approached him; his hands were trembling in anticipation. "Do not despair Sasuke, some part of you will live on in me. As a last mercy I will grant you any wish you may desire."

Sasuke eyed him with calm. "In that case I wish you to die a very painful death in a very short time."

Orochimaru laughed. "Ku, ku, ku that I am afraid I can't grant you."

Before his eyes Sasuke saw the image of a massive snake. Despite the pain of the transfer he refused to cry out. Though he died with many regrets he died as well as he could, and with the hope that his death would at least accomplish some good.

It began just a few hours later.

Orochimaru noticed he was feeling hot and his legs and arms were sore.

A couple hours later he had a fever and his body was wracked with aches and pains. He was forced to his bed as Kabuto examined him and tried to figure out what had happened. The news that the Otokage was ill spread quickly and people were fearful.

As night approached Orochimaru was coughing up blood and sores covered his entire body. It was obvious to anyone who looked at him that the Otokage was dying.

It was then that Naruto arrived at the Otokage's palace with the members of the Sound Seven with him. His first action was to dismiss the ANBU guards and inform them that he and his squad would protect the failing Orochimaru. The guards hesitated, but finally obeyed.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Kabuto demanded as he was dragged out of the palace with Zabuza holding both arms behind his back.

Naruto smiled at him. "You're being let go, I already have a medic nin to take your spot, and to be honest I don't think I could ever trust you."

Kabuto looked at him hatefully. "You poisoned Lord Orochimaru didn't you?!"

"Yeah I did," Naruto said. "Goodbye Kabuto."

At a nod Zabuza reached up with one hand and snapped Kabuto's neck with ease.

Orochimaru looked up from his sick bed when he heard the door open. "Kabuto where have you been? Do something to cure me."

"Oh I don't think he'll be able to do anything for you Otokage-sama," Naruto said as he strolled in. He took one look at the mess that was the great Snake Sannin and grinned. "Does it hurt? Can I get you some aspirin? I want your final hours to be as pain free as possible."

Orochimaru found the strength to summon a sliver of chakra and make a hand signal activating the death seal. "Die!"

Naruto's eyes widened and he suddenly clenched his chest. "Aaaaaaahh!" He stumbled forward as though about to fall.

Then he stopped and dropped both hands to his sides.

"Just kidding," he said.

Orochimaru stared at him hatefully. "You found the seal on your heart and countered it?"

"Of course, I am a seal master after all." He came over to Orochimaru's bed side and smiled down at the helpless ninja. "I want to thank you for all you've done for me, and thank you for working so hard to create the village of Oto. I promise you that as your successor I'll make it the most powerful village in the world."

"I curse you," Orochimaru said. "May you be damned."

That only made him laugh. "If I'm not already damned I'd be amazed. Goodbye Otokage-sama."

He walked out of Orochimaru's bedroom whistling a happy tune.

"I love it when a plan comes together."

Everything on track

Three days after Orochimaru's death Oto held a spectacular memorial and funeral service. The streets were lined with flowers and a huge feast was prepared for the entire village. The service was attended not only by the entire village, shinobi and civilian, but by representatives of all the other ninja villages great and small with the exceptions of Konoha and Suna of course. Even before the ceremony wild rumors had flown throughout the village that their beloved Otokage and his personal medic nin Kabuto had been murdered by leaf assassins. The authorities in Oto neither confirmed nor denied these rumors. The fact that members of the Sound Seven were overheard talking about leaf assassins did tend to give these rumors additional credence.

As the procession snaked its way from the Tower to the memorial ground it was led by the Second Otokage. Lord Uzumaki Naruto wore black mourning clothes like everyone else. His face held the same solemn sadness that many of the spectators felt in their own hearts. The sadness from the mourners was not feigned. To the people who lived in Oto Orochimaru had been a great and benevolent leader. He had founded their new village and many of them had come here and prospered thanks to his brilliant leadership. Whatever his enemies and victims might think many of the people who had come to say goodbye to him had truly loved him.

At the memorial ground the oak casket was laid down with care. On its side was the inscription; 'Orochimaru First Otokage and founder of the ninja village hidden within the sound.' Lord Uzumaki was giving his beloved sensei every possible honor and the best possible farewell.

As the ceremony commenced he stood before the vast crowd and spoke a few words in honor of his mentor and sensei.

"Today we say goodbye to a great man and leader. A man of rare genius and vision who created all that we see here today. Though he is gone I am certain his vision will live on in every single one of us. Let us strive And work hard to make Oto the great village Orochimaru-sama always dreamed of. To commemorate and honor his memory I have ordered seven days of feasting and public games. I have also ordered a statue in his image to be built that shall stand twenty feet tall. His memory shall live on."

With that he stepped forward and placed a white chrysanthemum before the coffin. His wife followed next with the various dignitaries doing likewise. After which the shinobi and common citizens came forward one by one to show their respects.

"May I say Otokage-sama that was very moving," the dignitary from Iwa said. She was a young kunoichi with shirt back hair, a black shirt beneath armor, black shorts and fishnet stockings.

"I thank you Kurotsuchi-san," Naruto replied.

"Of course I know it's easy to speak well of your sensei," she said. "Especially when they're gone and you know you'll never see them again."

Naruto gave her a sideways glance. Was she hinting at something? A subtle message that the Tsuchikage knew the sort of man he was?

"He was my sensei and my Kage and taught me a lot of the things. I know how much I owe to him."

Kurotsuchi nodded. "Such as your position as Otokage."

"Very true," Naruto replied. "He made me Vice Kage and his successor because he had faith in me. I can only hope to be as great a man as he was."

She smiled. "Not many men could hope to match a Sannin, but I suspect you just might."

"You praise me," he said.

"It's what I honestly believed and what the Tsuchikage believes as well," she looked over at him carefully. "He hopes the close ties between our two villages will continue."

"Please tell the Tsuchikage that I want that too. Inform him the treaty he and the Orochimaru signed will be honored by me. If he likes I will add my signature to it as well."

She quickly nodded. "If you do not object the Tsuchikage would appreciate that." She carefully looked about to confirm no one else was standing too close. As an added precaution she still dropped her voice. "And what of Konoha?"

"You may inform the Tsuchikage that Konoha's fate remains unchanged."

She gave another slight nod and carefully stepped away, well satisfied.

Naruto stood there looking on as the endless line of mourners slid up to and past the coffin. When the last mourner had paid his respects he and the funeral party would continue on to the field where the coffin would be buried.

Of course Orochimaru's body wasn't actually in there. He was going to allow Kabuto to perform one last useful task by taking his master's place in the cemetery.

Naruto had plans for the body.

"It's good to see you again Karin," Naruto said.

It was a couple days after the funeral and Naruto was no longer dressed in mourning clothes. He now wore some custom made robes that had been based on Orochimaru's design. The only

difference was that the robes were now in white and orange as opposed to white and gold. He had summoned his head researcher to his private office where he and Hinata were meeting with her.

So far everything had gone smoothly. Except for Orochimaru and Kabuto his little coup had come off seamlessly. No one else had died. He had proclaimed himself Otokage as soon as Orochimaru expired and ordered that all shinobi swear loyalty to him. The Oto nin had done so without a word of complaint, there hadn't even been any defections. They saw him as Orochimaru's legitimate successor, and given his own reputation no one had any delusions that they would challenge him for the post. The business leaders and guild leaders had been just as eager to kneel to him as soon as he told them the tax rates and regulations would all remain in place. The village's economy was running smoothly, the last thing he intended to do was interfere with that.

Karin and her staff were among the last he had called in to swear. She and the researchers she led were a bit nervous. She understood that some of the things they did might be objectionable to some. She didn't believe Naruto would be like that, especially as he *had* worn a curse seal. With Orochimaru's death however all the curse seals had been rendered inert. What would happen next with her research depended on what Naruto had to say to her now.

Karin fell to her knees without even waiting to be asked to. She cast her eyes to the floor and spoke.

"I swear my eternal and unwavering loyalty to you Lord Uzumaki Naruto. I am but your humble and obedient servant. Command me and I shall obey."

She looked up when she heard a snort of laughter from him.

"You humble Karin-chan? I doubt it, but thank you for swearing. It puts my mind at ease."

Seeing him in a good mood set her at ease too. "How can I serve you Otokage-sama?" She got back up to her feet.

He casually motioned to his wife who was standing by his desk. She was not smiling; she had on that cool Hyuuga mask of indifference. The way she stood ram rod straight did come off as a bit hostile. "I want you to start working closely with Hinata-chan. She is a brilliant medic nin and will help you in certain areas of your research."

"What areas did you have in mind Otokage-sama?" She liked doing things her own way but knew just how important it was to keep the person in charge happy.

Especially when the person in charge could have you dissected if he wasn't happy with you. Orochimaru had worked very hard to keep a sterling public reputation once he became Otokage. But where people couldn't see he was an absolute monster. (It never even occurred to her that her own test subjects viewed her in the exact same way.)

"Hinata will go mover that with you," he assured her. "I trust you to take care of the scientific side of things while she oversees the parts requiring jutsus. Just follow her lead and I will be happy."

"As you say Otokage-sama." Karin said. "What about the prisoners?"

"What about them?" Naruto asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly with a relieved smile. She'd been worried that he might release some of the prisoners Orochimaru had taken. Whole ninja clans had been imprisoned and turned into test subjects. Letting them go would ruin years of precious experimentation and data gathering.

"Well then why don't you go tell your staff you'll have a new boss soon. And that I'll have them come in to swear to me shortly."

"Yes Otokage-sama," Karin said and left his office. She was very happy; it looked like all the old policies would remain in place.

Naruto swiveled in his chair a bit so that he was facing his wife. She wasn't showing it much, but his nose could pick up her heavy discontent.

"You're not happy about this?" He asked mildly.

"No Naruto-kun I'm not," she told him. "I never said anything about Orochimaru's experiments while he was alive. But now that he'd gone and you're in charge they should be stopped. They're an abomination!"

"They also led him to create the curse seal, the body replacement technique as well as edo tensei; the resurrection technique. Think of all the wonders that remain undiscovered, and the things that remain to be perfected."

"But some things shouldn't be learned!" She blurted out. "Naruto-kun I've accepted a lot of things since coming here as the price of being with you. I saw the things Orochimaru and Kabuto were working on and said nothing because I knew we had no choice but to stay here. Without his protection we would have been in even more danger than we already were. But things have changed now."

She looked at her husband and brought her hands together to plead to him.

"You finally have the power now Naruto-kun! Can't we stop doing these horrible things and make this village something wonderful?"

"But it is something wonderful Hinata-chan," he said as he came to his feet. He slipped his arms around her hips and pulled her close to him. He pressed her soft feminine body to him and looked into her gentle eyes. "Oto is a fantastic village that is only going to keep expanding and growing in power and influence. Don't you like the

people who live here? Aren't they good folk? Every bit as worthy as the people who live in Konoha?"

"We... well, ye... yes, that's true. The regular people and even most of the shinobi are good people," she admitted. The way he was looking into her eyes was making her heart beat faster. She loved him so much. She had never for even one moment regretted her decision to abandon her village to come be with him. "The village itself is a fantastic place; it's the things that happen in the camps and the secret bases that I want to stop."

He smiled and he stroked the side of her neck with a single gloved finger. He saw her eyes close as a small shiver ran through her. Every ninja village has its dark side Hinata-chan, things that are absolutely necessary but are kept hidden. What are ninjas after all? We're assassins, spies, and thieves that's what we are. You can't pretend that we're monks or innocent sheep herders. I mean do you really think the other villages don't have places like that too? Even Konoha. You saw how they treated me; do you think they wouldn't be just as cruel to prisoners and criminals?"

"And what about Konoha?" She asked.

"What about it?" He answered. He was still smiling but the tiniest bit of unhappiness was building behind his blue eyes. "You know I mean to take revenge on them for that they did to me. I never kept that secret from you."

"I... I know, but... can't you forgive them?" She placed both her hands on his cheek. "Can't you forgive at least some of them?"

"If they submit to me and swear to serve only me I'll spare them," he saw she was going to argue and went on. "I promise you Hinata-chan, I give you my word. If they surrender and swear fealty I'll show mercy." He hadn't told her about his last conversation with Sasuke or about his promise. Making the same promise to her would cost nothing and would make her happy.

"Thank you Naruto-kun," she said pleased. She hadn't expected to get even that much. "But what about the prisoners and the research? Can't we..."

He cut her off with a sudden kiss that made her toes curl.

"Hinata-chan," he said once he came back up for air. "You do trust me don't you Hinata-chan?"

"Of... of course Naruto-kun, I trust you completely." She meant it too. Despite all the things he had done he had never hurt her. And he had kept his promise from that long ago night that if she went with him he would marry her. No matter how many terrible things he did he was her darling Naruto-kun and the only one who had ever truly loved her.

"The trust me that I know what I'm doing now." He gave her another lingering kiss. "*I need* you Hinata-chan. There is no one else who I can trust with this. You will help me won't you?"

When he asked her like that she knew there was no way she could refuse him. She would do anything for him. "I will do it," she said. She still had her doubts, but for his sake she would push them aside and do what her Naruto-kun needed.

Out in a field far from prying eyes a hundred men women and children had been staked to the ground. They were all citizens of Fire country who had been captured in a raid for this very purpose. He could hear some of them calling to him for mercy. He could hear some of the children crying and wailing. Neither the pleas nor the tears mattered to him. They weren't people anyway; they were just a means to an end.

Removing a glove he bit down on a thumb and ran through some hand signs. " **Kuchiyose no Jutsu!**"

There was a massive puff of black smoke that momentarily obscured the field. When it cleared a gigantic black and purple snake towered over the helpless prisoners. Riding on his snout was Naruto.

"Naruto! How dare you summon me?! You were permitted to sign the snake summoning seal but only the master summoner is permitted to call on me! Where is Orochimaru?" The snake loudly demanded.

"Orochimaru-sama in somewhere in hell I have no doubt," Naruto replied. "That makes me master summoner now." He waved to the prisoners. "I will show you the respect that is due you Manda, one hundred human sacrifices for each time I summon you. I just want you to acknowledge my new position."

His forked tongue slipped out and stirred back and forth letting him taste the air. It was filled with the mouth watering scent of human terror. Their screams were also adding to his appetite.

"All right," the gigantic snake rumbled. "I'll acknowledge you as the master summoner and the only one permitted to summon me. Show me respect and we will get along fine, otherwise I'll devour you too."

Naruto bowed respectfully. "I understand Manda. Bon appétit." He disappeared in a flash of smoke and left Manda to enjoy his meal in peace.

He returned to Oto well satisfied with his progress. He had all the power and knowledge Orochimaru'd had. Everything was on track.

Jiraiya entered the Hokage's office without his typical smirk.

"What do you want?" He asked with a snarl.

Danzo looked at him without taking any apparent offence. "I know that Sarutobi was your former sensei and you feel a certain loyalty to him. But I trust you still feel a greater loyalty to your village."

"Don't ask me too many questions about my loyalty or my opinion of you," he said. "Now tell me what you want."

"Very well," Danzo answered. "I want you to make a weapon that can kill the nine tail fox."

Come in

"You want me to make a weapon to kill the Kyuubi?" Jiraiya asked. "Well sure, that shouldn't be too hard. Do you have any other small requests? Maybe while I'm at it I can invent a perpetual youth jutsu or turn lead into gold."

"I am being completely serious Jiraiya," Danzo said.

"I know, that's what makes it so damn funny."

"Naruto must die," Danzo said in a calm voice. "Konoha will never know real peace as long as he is out there."

"And your answer is to have me invent some magical weapon that can kill him?"

"Shikamaru informs me that during their encounter he was impervious to both the Nara shadow techniques as well as the Yamanaka mind possession techniques. Naruto claimed that he was shielded against genjutsu and all other possession jutsus. Given the fact he is a seal master that is likely to be no idle boast. Combined with the protection of the Kyuubi's chakra and his advanced healing he is already more or less invulnerable to physical attacks. So how else is he to be killed?"

Jiraiya grimaced, when put that way it was a damn good question. "So the solution you come up with is to have me whip up some sort of super weapon that can not only defeat his seals but his demonic chakra and healing ability? That's something not even the Yondaime could make. Do you even get what you're asking?"

"Of course," Danzo replied, still calm. "I am asking you for a miracle. The same sort of miracle the Yondaime provided all those years ago."

"Don't compare this to that!"

"And why not? As before the village is threatened with utter annihilation due to the power of the nine tail demon fox. Now as then we are defenseless against that power and must turn to one of our heroes for salvation. Will you turn your back on Konoha?"

"Has it occurred to you that we wouldn't have to worry about Naruto seeking vengeance if the village had just treated him decently like the old man and Minato wanted?"

"That would also be the case had he been placed within the ANBU from the very beginning as I suggested."

"You would have made him a living weapon," Jiraiya said contemptuously. "He'd have been nothing but a mindless puppet."

"And so?" Danzo replied utterly unmoved. "He would have been utterly loyal."

"He is the Yondaime's only son! You know that as well as I do, even if you won't admit to it publicly. Minato's last wish was to have the village treat him as a hero. At the very least we owed him the chance at a normal life."

"That was always Sarutobi's argument," Danzo said. "And see where that sort of thinking has led us. He was always much too soft and sentimental, a leader must be absolutely ruthless. And I find it a bit strange Jiraiya to hear this argument coming from you now. At least Sarutobi acted on his convictions, misguided as they were. You never even met him until shortly before the Chunin Exams. Had you been so concerned with his welfare you might have at the very least checked in on him from time to time."

Especially since I was the boy's godfather. Jiraiya thought. He was very glad that people didn't know about that. The shameful truth was that when Minato and Kushina both died he was too consumed by grief to do what a godfather was supposed to do. The idea of taking responsibility and becoming Naruto's father was just too much for him.

And so he'd run. He'd you'd the excuse of carrying out important missions for the village. He'd stayed away for years, never returning even to check in. He pretended to be carrying out his duty, but the sad truth was that he was doing just the opposite; running away from his duty to Minato and Naruto. *Would things have been different if I had stayed?* He wondered if the villagers would have treated the boy in the same way if he'd been officially adopted by one of the Sannin. Would that have been enough to get him decent treatment? Would that have been enough to change things? He would never know, and that was his own personal torment and shame.

"I made mistakes," Jiraiya admitted in a small voice.

"As did Sarutobi," Danzo replied patiently. "It now falls upon me to correct those mistakes. Will you not set aside your personal feelings and help me? If not for my sake then for the good of the village?"

"For the good of the village?" Jiraiya echoed dully. "Funny how the worst and bloodiest crimes are usually excused with those words."

"Destroying a traitor and safeguarding the village is no crime. The causes and the mistakes are all in the past now, all that is left to us is to solve the problem. Do you have some other solution?"

Jiraiya would have loved nothing better than to have given him one. But try as he might he didn't have one. It was obvious that no matter the reason there was no chance of talking to Naruto now. No chance that he would ever be anything but Konoha's enemy. Sadly the Toad Sannin shook his head.

"Then you agree with me that he has to be destroyed?"

"Yes," he hated saying it but that was the truth of their situation they were now in. Naruto would never be a friend and he was far too powerful to be left alone. What did that leave?

"Then you will do as I ask?"

With a defeated sigh Jiraiya nodded. "All right, I'll help."

They were outside a decrepit and run down brick apartment building. Outside garbage was piled up and a couple scrawny dogs were digging through to find whatever they could. Nearby a weary old bum sat in the middle of the sidewalk drinking from a bottle. He seemed oblivious to the world around him, more a part of the scenery than an actual person. The few people walking past avoided stepping on him but otherwise failed to even notice. This was one of the poorest slums in Nagamo, a place you came to only when you had absolutely nowhere else to go.

"I've seen nicer looking prisons," Zabuza quipped.

Naruto silently grinned. He liked the way Zabuza always spoke his mind. It was a refreshing change from all those who mindlessly agreed with him and always tried to tell him what he wanted to hear whether it was the truth or not. Since becoming Otokage a couple months before he'd noticed it was harder and harder to find people to tell him what they really thought. And it hadn't been that easy before when he was *only* the Kyuubi's jinchurikki. "Are you sure she's here?"

"As sure as I can be," Zabuza said with a shrug. "She's damn hard to track down."

"So I've noticed," Naruto said dryly.

"We are fairly certain it is her Naruto-sama," Haku said politely. "As per your orders we did not attempt to contact her directly."

Naruto nodded. If they had tried to confront her there would have been a fight or she would have tried to run. More likely there would have been a fight *and* she would have tried to run. The once proud kunichi had been reduced to a life in the shadows like some common thief. All she could do these days was run and hide from all those who were so keen on trying to find her.

"Is this stupid bitch even worth the trouble?" Tayuya asked loudly. Like Zabuza she also was not afraid to speak her mind.

"Well she is a Sannin," Naruto said. "And the last of the Senju *and* the world's top medical ninja and expert on medical jutsus. That makes her pretty special."

"I guess they aren't paying medic nins what they used to then," Zabuza joked.

Most of the Sound Seven had a good laugh at that.

"Well it's hard to find work when you have to spend all your time hiding from your creditors," Naruto said. "All of you wait here." He then leapt down from the roof of the building. He landed before the front door and simply walked inside.

She was all alone now.

She had no one left in her life anymore.

Shizune had stayed by her side for a long while. She had tried to get her to change her ways without success and had stood by her much longer than she should have. But finally even she had despaired and given up. She'd said her goodbyes and returned to Konoha to begin a new life.

Tsunade didn't blame her. How long could you expect someone to put up with babysitting an old drunk like her? Eventually Shizune had been forced to give up. She tried to convince her to return with her right up until the moment she left.

Alone in her room she made a rude noise and reached for a bottle. Return to Konoha? For what? So that she could be reminded of all the things she'd lost? To return to the village that had taken her two loved ones? No. No, there was nothing in Konoha for her anymore.

In the end a tearful Shizune had left to return to Konoha alone.

That was how the 60 year old Tsunade had found herself all alone in a cramped, roach infested, moldy apartment. She tried to drink from the bottle but found it was disappointingly empty. She was surrounded by empty beer and sake bottles. Looking around blearily she wondered if they were all empty. If so she wondered if she had enough money to go out and get more. If not she would have to scrounge around to find some sort of work. In spite of her age she was still immensely strong physically. She could henge into a rough looking man and find some manual labor. It didn't pay much but it would be enough to take care of the rent here and get her more booze. (Things like food and other necessities she didn't worry too much about.) It was also much safer for her than trying to find work as a medic nin.

In what had to be one of the all time great ironies, she, the world's acknowledged top expert on medical jutsu could no longer practice her trade. Even with a henge it was impossible. The moment word spread about some unknown medic nin got out there would be a swarm of bounty hunters and investigators looking for her. She had racked up debts totaling just under 50 million ryu. She had borrowed money from banks, nobles, governments, and even loan sharks. Now all of them were looking for her and demanding repayment. Those to whom she owed at least a million would also be demanding she hand over her sole remaining asset to them, the Shodai's necklace.

She looked at the crystal hanging by its chain about her neck. With it you could buy two gold mines and the mountains on top of them. Even now she could sell it and have enough to pay her entire debt off and *still* have more than enough left over for a comfortable retirement.

"Why don't I then?" She muttered to herself. She wasn't sure she had enough to buy herself a bottle of rot gut but she had a fortune literally in the palm of her hand.

All she had to do was sell it.

Despite asking the question out loud she knew she could never part with it. She was ready to die alone and in poverty first. It was all she had left of the two people she had loved the most. Nawaki, her little brother, and Dan the one true love of her life. Selling the necklace would be like truly saying goodbye to them forever. That was foolish. They were both long dead now, but she couldn't bear to part with it just the same.

It was at that instant that a polite knock sounded from the front door.

She glanced at the door nervously. Rent was not due until the end of the week and she had not ordered anything. These days unexpected visitors were always unwelcome. She glanced at the windows and began mapping out escape routes in her head. She was ready to leave with nothing but the necklace and the clothes on her back. She'd done it before.

As if picking out her thoughts a voice came from the door. "Please let me in honored Tsunade-sama. I give you my word all I want to do is talk. You should also know I have ninja waiting outside. If you try to run they have orders to bring you down with as much force as is necessary. I would like to avoid that. I want things to remain pleasant."

"Pleasant, right, just who the hell are you?" Bill collectors didn't usually bother asking to chat.

"I am Lord Uzumaki Naruto, Otokage and holder of the nine tail demon fox."

Uzumaki?! Despite being constantly on the move and in hiding she still knew about the events connected to him. Sliding back a dead bolt she opened the door just a crack in order to get a look at him. He was dressed in a ridiculous orange and black outfit that included gloves. He had a hitai-ite with a musical note stamped into it. On each cheek were three whiskers like scars and he had spiky blond

hair. But what really caught her attention were his eyes. They were the exact same shade of blue as Minato's had been, and looking at his face he looked just like a teenage Minato. There was no mistaking just whose son he was.

He stood there and smiled at her, making no effort to force his way in. "May I come in?"

She stood there a moment just staring. Then finally stood aside and opened the door wide. "All right, come in."

A bloody path

Looking around at the tiny apartment Naruto felt an odd sense of nostalgia. The trash on the floor, the mold, the rickety furniture, even the dishes piled in the sink all reminded him of his old apartment. The only real difference was that it would have been cups of instant ramen covering every nook and cranny instead of empty bottles of liquor. *Well I was always the village pariah, she was... is a Sannin. How the mighty have fallen.*

He was very careful to mask his thoughts as he entered, but there was no way Tsunade could not know they were there. She knew how this pigsty had to reflect on her. Since Shizune's departure she had stopped caring about appearances. "I hope you'll excuse the mess, I wasn't expecting company." She waved to one of the chairs by the table. "Will you have a seat?"

"Sure," Naruto said and sat down at the small table covered by empty bottles. He really wasn't bothered by the mess or by the surroundings. One of the slight advantages of having grown up poor. "Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I would have sent someone to set up a meeting but I trust you understand why I didn't think I could do that."

"You were probably afraid I'd vanish," Tsunade took the other seat across from him.

"Yes," Naruto answered blandly. He'd done his research and Tsunade had a reputation for being almost painfully blunt. He figured she would appreciate it if he was straightforward. From the very slight approving nod she gave him he thought he'd guessed right.

From her place across the table she surveyed the man who was causing so many so much worry. "I knew both your parents," she said cautiously. "If you'd like I could tell you about them."

"Hmmm, well if you don't mind I'd like to find about my mom."

Tsunade could keep from lifting an eyebrow in surprise. "What about your father?"

"I don't need to hear about him," Naruto smiled as he spoke but there was a clear chill to his words. "I heard more than enough about the great Yondaime back in school."

"All right," she leaned back in her chair, never letting her eyes leave his. "Is it true you killed that snake Orochimaru? I know the official story is he died of an illness but no one believes that."

"Yes I did," he answered directly. "I hope that doesn't anger you, my killing your former teammate."

She shrugged. "We stopped being teammates or even friends a long time ago. His being dead makes the world a better place."

"I'm glad you think so."

The two of them sat there in a momentary silence. Naruto still had the same intense and passionate nature he always had, but his time with Orochimaru had taught him the value of patience and of silence. He counted it as a small victory that Tsunade was the next one to speak.

"So just why are you here Uzumaki? What does Konoha's greatest enemy want to talk about?"

He gave her his friendliest smile and spread his hands. "Isn't it obvious? I want you to join me."

"Kakashi-sensei."

Kakashi halted and looked up from his book. Beneath his mask he gave her a hidden smile. "Hello Sakura."

Sakura stared for a moment. It was odd to look at his face and see *two* eyes staring back at her. The fact the eyes were mismatched added to her sense of the bizarre. One was a pale grey while the other was a muddy brown. The fact his hitai-ite was worn straight across his forehead now rather than at an angle also seemed odd.

"Hello sensei," she managed a weak smile and did her best to pretend her whole world had not fallen apart. "If... if you have some time would you mind getting some tea with me? I was hoping I could talk to you about some things."

He'd known she'd come to talk to him sooner or later. He knew just what sort of questions she would ask him too. He shut his book with a snap and put it away. He wasn't sure if she would really want to hear his answers, but he owed her at least that much. "That sounds great Sakura, let's go."

"No," Tsunade replied instantly.

Naruto continued to smile; he hadn't expected anything else for an initial reaction. "No? Just like that? Aw, come on, at least let me tell you what I have to offer you first."

"Let me guess," she said not bothering to hide her scorn. "Money, power, and anything else I want. Is that about right?"

"You say it like it's a small thing," pointedly he looked about the room. "For someone hiding out in a place like this don't you think a little money and power sounds good? I'm prepared to pay off all your debts and give you a place of honor at my right hand. Come to Oto and serve me faithfully and I'll give you total authority over the Medical Corps, you can shape into whatever you like."

Tsunade put her head back and laughed. "Serve you faithfully? You've got balls to say that to me brat. Your father could have said that and I might have listened."

"I'm not my father," Naruto said coldly.

"I know, and that's a real pity, he'd be ashamed to see you now."

"Would he be more or less ashamed of how Sarutobi and the village treated me?"

She gave a slight nod. "Oh from what I hear there was plenty of shame to go around. Believe me; I lost my faith in the village a long time ago. I know how Konoha devours its ninja, what happened to you was bad, but it's not my concern. You're lucky I feel that way too, otherwise I might have attacked you."

"You'd have died if you had."

She'd heard tough talk from people before and normally dismissed it. From the man who had slaughtered most of Konoha's ANBU at the Valley of the End and taken out Orochimaru with ease she decided she decided a little caution was in order.

"If you're so powerful why are you bothering to recruit me?"

"Orochimaru-sensei had a high opinion of you," Naruto replied. "I only ever heard him talk that way about three people; you, Sarutobi, and Uchiha Itachi. I figured anyone who could impress him was worth chasing after."

"What about Jiraiya?"

"Orochimaru always thought he was an idiot and too easy to distract." Naruto chuckled sourly. "I've run into him a few times too and I can't say I was impressed either."

"Jiraiya **is** an idiot and a pervert to boot," Tsunade agreed. "However he is as deserving of the title Sannin as me or your old teacher. What he lacks in cleverness he more than made up for in heart and guts."

"Sure," Naruto agreed in a voice that clearly said he didn't.

"Any way, while I'm flattered by your offer my answer is still no. So unless you were serious about wanting to hear stories about your mom I think you should go."

"With respect Lady Tsunade you still haven't heard my full offer. I still have much more I could give you."

"Like what? Secret jutsus? A chest full of gems? My own army?" She shook her head. "None of that interests me."

"I didn't think it would," Naruto answered with a hint of smugness. "If you could be satisfied so easily someone would have done it a long time ago. What you want though is much harder to provide. You want the people you loved most to come back to you. You want to see your precious little brother Nawaki and your lover Dan again. *That's* the real reason you still have that necklace isn't it? Because it's a reminder of them. You'd rather live in squalor and drink yourself to death than part with that last reminder of them."

Tsunade brought her hand up and slapped it down on the table. It shattered into pieces. She then reached out and grabbed Naruto by the collar hauling him to his feet. Her other hand glowed with chakra and was balled into a fist. "How dare you!" She screamed into his face. "Who the hell do you think you are to bring them up and talk about them like they were chips on a poker table?! They've been dead longer than you've been alive! The **only** reason I don't beat you to death right now is because I once loved your parents. Get the hell out of here before I lose my patience."

Naruto made no effort to pull away from her or defend himself, at least not deliberately. The red chakra flowed out of him and formed a cloak around his body as it always did when he was in danger. His absolute defense required no conscious thought on his part. Tsunade grunted as she was forced to let go of him as the chakra cover his front and freed him of her grip. Despite her anger she took a step back. She could feel the immense power flowing off of him. She was certain any ninja within at least a mile would be able to feel it as well. The cloak formed only a single tail.

"Forgive me Lady Tsunade," he said and gave her a bow that was in no way mocking. "I didn't mean to offend you. When I brought up Nawaki and Dan I wasn't trying to mock you. I can give them back to you, not exactly as they were, but close enough. I can make them return to this world with all their memories and feelings of love for you. They won't be truly alive but it will be them in every way that matters."

"What the hell kind of con are you trying to pull?" She demanded. "What, you think you can create some kind of illusion and that will be enough to make me serve you?"

"What I'm offering is much more than some cheap genjutsu. Orochimaru created a technique that could force the spirits of the dead to return to the land of the living. The jutsu hasn't been perfected yet, the effects are only temporary, but I can make them permanent eventually. I can give you back the people you love."

"I don't believe you," she snapped. "You'd say anything to try and trick me."

He nodded. "I wouldn't expect you to believe something like that without proof, that's why I brought some with me."

As if at a prearranged signal there was a knock at the front door. "Otokage? Are you all right?"

"Just fine Haku." He'd expected that at some point he would release some of his demonic chakra either on purpose or in self defense. He'd left instructions of what to do when that happened. "Is our special guest with you?"

"She is Otokage-sama," Haku replied. "She is most eager to speak with Tsunade-sama."

Naruto looked back at a somewhat worried Tsunade. "I have someone here who can convince you that what I say is true. Will you allow her to come in; I assure you that she is no threat to you."

"Who is it?" She asked.

"An old friend of yours, someone you haven't seen in a long time."
He refused to say any more.

She eyed the door. She had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Somehow the thought of what might be behind that door scared her more than having the Kyuubi's jinchurikki not five feet away.

"Can she come in Lady Tsunade? She doesn't have that much time."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Naruto merely grinned at her.

He may look like Minato but he reminds me more of Orochimaru. "
Fine, whoever it is let her in."

Naruto went to the door and opened it himself. "Come in, come in, Tsunade is eager to see you again."

A young woman of no more than 16 or 17 stepped tentatively into the room glancing about before spotting Tsunade. She was dressed in a green and brown jacket and dark grey trousers. Her weapons pouches and the grace of her movement proclaimed her a kunoichi. As she stepped inside and got a good look at Tsunade a wide smile of relief covered her face. "Tsunade! It's so good to see you!" Arms open she ran over to her without hesitation.

Seeing her face Tsunade paled. "Mi... Miya? Hyuuga Miya?"

"It's so good to see you!" The girl exclaimed and wrapped her arms around Tsunade as she hugged her. "Everything's been so confusing; I don't know what's happened to me. The last thing I remember was being in a huge battle against Hanzo and his men in Rain country. The next thing I knew I was here. What's going on? Is Aki okay? I lost track of him during the fighting."

Aki had been her fiancé and another member of the Hyuuga clan. Both he and Miya had been part of the Leaf army that had fought in the battle where Tsunade, Orochimaru, and Jiraiya had received the title of Sannin from Hanzo himself. Hanzo had so honored them because they alone had survived. Every other Leaf nin had died that day. Including Aki and Miya. They were both more than 20 years dead.

"He... he's fine," Tsunade croaked. As she did so she forced chakra to pulse through her system, desperately hoping this was some sort of genjutsu. When nothing changed she was forced to admit it was not. She hadn't thought about Miya in more than a decade, but looking in the girl's face it was like being back in time. This was Hyuuga Miya, of that she was certain. "Do you remember the shopping trip we took a couple weeks before the battle?"

"You mean in that little town in Grass? The one with the ivory carvings you liked? I remember you were thinking about buying that little cat carving but didn't want to spend the ryu."

"That... that's right," she answered with a sickly grin. That town had been annihilated less than three months later with all the civilians there slaughtered. The only people who'd been present with her had been Dan, Aki, and Miya. It was impossible that Naruto could know about a little ivory cat she'd been interested in back before he was ever born.

"So do you believe me?" Naruto asked.

She looked at him past the girl who was still hugging her and nodded. "Yes."

"Glad to hear it," he said and made a single hand sign of negation.

"Ahhh!" Miya cried out in sudden fear.

"What's wrong?" Tsunade asked and began casting a diagnostic jutsu to find out what it was.

The problem quickly became self evident as Miya's body began to revert to ash. The girl sent her friend a last frightened look before falling at her feet. As Tsunade watched Miya's form crumbled away to reveal the body of a stranger, a lifeless corpse of some ninja covered in ashes.

Naruto explained. "Like I said, the jutsu is only temporary and can be used only once per soul. Your grandfather and grand uncle were already summoned by Orochimaru and can never be summoned again." He deliberately left out the fact that his father had also been summoned previously. "That's why I didn't try to summon Nawaki or Dan. I'll wait until I have the jutsu perfected, it may take years but I'm confident I can do it. When that time comes I'll bring them back for you."

Tsunade stared at him open mouthed, the revelation of what she had just seen was starting to hit her. It really might be possible; she might really see them again. She looked back at the body at her feet. "This jutsu, it requires a human sacrifice to work doesn't it?"

"That's right," Naruto replied. "For a human soul to be brought back one has to be sacrificed. Of course I'll need *lots* of human test subjects in order to perfect it. Part of your job will be to assist me in that. I hope you don't object, every great achievement requires some cost after all."

She stared down at the corpse and then at Naruto. She understood the devil's bargain he was offering her. As a medic nin she had always hated war and pointless death. When she'd heard about Orochimaru's experiments she'd been disgusted. She'd thought him a monster for being able to use human beings as nothing but experimental fodder, exterminating countless lives all for the sake of knowledge. She'd known that she could never do the same.

Now if she wanted to see Dan and Nawaki again she would have to wade through human blood. Naruto wasn't trying to trick her, his offer was plain and clear. She understood that if she accepted it she would never be able to refuse anything he commanded of her. No

crime would ever be too hideous or revolting. She would walk in Orochimaru's footsteps and do it willingly.

A path that would someday bring her loved ones back to her.

"Will you serve me Lady Tsunade?" He held his hand out to her. "Will you proclaim me your Lord and follow me of your own free will?"

Perhaps if Shizune hadn't gone she would have found the strength to say no. Perhaps if she weren't all alone. Perhaps if she were still practicing medicine and helping people rather than spending all her time hiding and getting drunk.

And perhaps she was just making excuses; perhaps she would have given the same answer no matter what once she realized what he was offering was possible.

"I will," her voice was weak, barely above a whisper, but loud enough for him to hear her.

"Swear it then," he commanded.

She fell slowly to her knees and lowered her face. "I swear to serve you in all ways and in all things for as long as I shall live... my Lord Uzumaki Naruto."

"Good," he said sounding extremely satisfied. "Now up on you feet Tsunade, we have a long way back to Oto and a lot of work ahead of us."

A special envoy

Sakura stared down into her cup of tea. "So Naruto wouldn't have done anything if he hadn't been attacked by Shikamaru and the others?" Her voice was empty and lifeless.

"That's what he *said*," Kakashi told her. "Though he only said that after Root put in its appearance so he might have said it only to cause Sasuke and me mental anguish. I'm not sure how far I would trust anything he says."

"You and Sasuke-kun and Lord Sarutobi must have believed some or you never would have gone to him in the first place!"

Kakashi looked about the crowded tea room to see if anyone might have over heard. "Lower your voice Sakura. Some things are very dangerous to say. If the Fifth Hokage heard you say that you'd be arrested immediately."

Sakura gave a weary nod. As the new Hokage Danzo had gone out of his way to disguise his minor coup. The villagers and most of the ninja believed Sarutobi had finally decided to retire. It was not hard to believe, the man was well into his 70's after all. Danzo had been a very powerful man in the village for over two decades. His selection as Fifth Hokage had been slightly surprising only because he was as old as Sarutobi. Most felt he was just a place holder until someone younger could be chosen, but he was strong and intelligent even at his advanced age. Most people felt the village was in good hands. He would definitely not be happy with anyone connecting Sarutobi with a mission sent to Naruto.

"So it really was my fault," she said in a tired voice. She might have started crying except she thought she was completely out of tears. "Sasuke died because of what I did."

"That's not necessarily true Sakura, remember Naruto had already violated our agreement by having the Sound Seven there." Kakashi said. "He likely intended to betray us all along. Sasuke understood that was a real possibility the moment we agreed to go and meet with him."

"You can't know that though! Maybe he would have listened! If I hadn't told Shikamaru..."

He reached out and took her hand. "Sakura, you need to be strong. Sasuke would want you to be strong." Though he was upset with her for what she had done she was the last of his students he could still help.

She pulled her hand away from him and got to her feet. "Thank you for telling me the truth Kakashi-sensei. I think I'll go now."

He saw a defeated look in her eye that set off alarm bells. "Sakura don't blame yourself and please don't do anything stupid!"

She gave him the palest copy of a smile. "Don't worry sensei, I'm fine."

A month later the Otokage was at his desk going over a request he'd received for an audience.

"What do you think?" He handed the letter over to his newest advisor.

Tsunade took it and read through it carefully.

Her arrival in Oto had struck the ninja world like a bolt from the blue. In spite of her many years wandering about acquiring debts her name had remained one of the most respected in the Elemental Lands. She remained the last of the great Senju clan and the granddaughter of the man who had founded Konoha. She was still a Sanin and the number one medical ninja in all the world. Wealthy

men from all over the continent were already busy scheduling appointments to see her for various medical ills. Leaders both great and small were impressed that she had chosen to join Oto and the village's reputation was enhanced.

Likewise, these same leaders assumed there had to be something fundamentally wrong with Konoha to driver her to abandon the village her grandfather had created. Overnight the Leaf's reputation began to suffer and there were serious questions as to how strong the village really was. Danzo and his village struck back with claims that Tsunade had to be acting under some sort of coercion, that she would never willingly betray the village. They spread stories that she was under some type of mind control or being forced to serve in order to pay off her huge debts. A smear campaign was begun to portray her as a ryu less drunk no longer to be found sober.

These efforts by Danzo were destined to fail as many important people traveled to Oto and met her. Anyone who met her in the flesh soon saw she was hale and healthy and as intelligent and willful as she had ever been. It was also clear she was acting of her own accord.

That was all for public consumption. Behind the scenes she was greatly disturbed by the facilities and programs that had been established by Orochimaru and then kept in place by Naruto. The things she saw sickened her. Yet she would not refuse to work for him. It was just as she'd known it would be when she made her agreement with him.

Now along with everything else he also had her acting as an advisor.

"Is this a serious request?" She asked first. "It's much more likely to be just another ruse."

"That letter was delivered to me through the ambassador from Cloud," Naruto informed her. "He vouches for its authenticity."

"If it's real then it's likely an assassination attempt."

Naruto surprised her by shaking his head. "No, if they were going to try anything like that they would use back channels and insist on a meeting in a neutral location. Like what happened with Kakashi and Sasuke. If they ask for this right out in the open *and* agree to come here then they'll be bound to act in good faith. If they were to try and use this to set up an attempt on my life it would completely destroy their diplomatic credibility. Their agreements wouldn't be worth the paper they were written on. Even among ninja there are limits."

"Maybe they're hoping you'll use it as an excuse for an assassination and have your reputation destroyed." Tsunade said.

"It wouldn't surprise me," the Otokage said. "Those people *still* see me as either an idiot or mindless brute."

"You're not actually going to accept their offer are you?"

Naruto laughed. "Are you kidding? Of course I'm accepting it! How can I say no to seeing a dear old friend again?"

"From what I hear the last time you met a couple dear old friends one died and the other lost an eye," she said dryly. "I hope this meeting goes a bit better. I've known him a long time, and while feelings aren't exactly good between us I still respect him and don't want him to be killed. He and I went through a lot together before things went bad."

"I won't hurt him," Naruto promised. "I'll treat him with even more honor than a Sanin deserves. I just want to talk to him face to face about a few things that's all."

At about the same time the Otokage was making his reply Nara Shikamaru had arrived in the ninja village of Ame and was delivered to a secluded temple where he was to meet the living god who ruled over Rain country.

The interior of the temple was hardly luxurious and did not seem very accommodating for a leader of a ninja village never mind a 'god.' Shikamaru was delivered to an audience chamber and told to wait there.

It was not long before a figure with orange hair and multiple facial piercings entered. He was dressed in a black robe with red clouds. "I understand you are here as a representative of the Fifth Hokage Danzo to deliver some proposal."

Shikamaru turned to face him dressed in ANBU armor and his deer mask in place. He bowed and then spoke. "I am. I trust I am speaking not only to the leader of Amegakure but of the criminal organization Akatsuki?"

"I am indeed the leader of the Rain ninja. As to the other I will not deny I have connections to Akatsuki, though I do not claim the title of leader."

You wouldn't be wearing that if you didn't want to stress you were part of Akatsuki, Shikamaru thought. And you are its leader whether you choose to admit to it or not. "I have come bearing an offer on behalf of the Hokage." He drew a scroll from a pocket. "It bears his signature and seal." Shikamaru performed a specific hand gesture to deactivate a jutsu that had been placed on it. Had anyone else but him touched it the scroll would have burst into flame. What was written on the paper with the Hokage's hand would have gotten him executed if it fell into the wrong hands, no chances could be taken with it.

Shikamaru handed the document over to the leader of Akatsuki.

The man broke open the wax seal with his thumb and unrolled it. He read what was written without comment or any sort of obvious reaction. At last when he was done he rolled it up again. "Your Hokage requests an assassination, and an extremely difficult one. The conditions he adds make it even more so, not only is the target

a powerful ninja he asks that it be performed within a ninja village during a formal conference. A very difficult task."

"Which is why the Hokage is willing to pay such a high price. Fifty million ryu, half immediately and half payable upon completion of the task."

The man looked at the rolled up scroll for a moment... then gave just the slightest of nods and put the document away in his robe. "Tell your Hokage to transfer the funds; on behalf of my organization I accept this contract."

"We're going to help Danzo?" Konan asked utterly bewildered. "After what he did to us? How can you help him?"

"I am not helping him," Pein answered. "This act will seal his fate and Konoha's"

Konan stared at him. "I don't understand."

He drew the scroll out and held it in his hands. "Trust in me, this will aid us in our revenge and I find it fitting to accept his blood money in payment of a service that will ruin him."

When all the preparations had been made the special envoy from Konoha arrived at the gates of Oto. As agreed he had with him only two Jonin bodyguards. He was greeted at the gate not only by Tsunade, Uzumaki Hinata, and the Sound Seven but by the Otokage himself. Normal protocol would call for the envoy to be escorted to the Tower where he would be granted an audience. By meeting him at the gate Naruto was granting the man a special privilege and showing him an unusual amount of honor.

The envoy bowed upon meeting him face to face. "I thank you for receiving me Lord Uzumaki Naruto Otokage-sama."

Resplendent in his white and orange robes Naruto easily returned the bow. "Welcome to Otogakure Lord Hiruzen Sarutobi Third Hokage of Konohagakure I welcome you and promise no harm shall fall upon you."

Old friends

The initial formalities out of the way the two men eyes each other. As Sarutobi was now a retired leader of the village he was no longer permitted to wear the Hokage robes. He was instead dressed in black ninja gear. Naruto looked him over carefully then gave a broad smile and noted his main impression.

"I remember you being a lot bigger."

"To a twelve year old I am huge," Sarutobi replied. That brought out a snort of laughter from Naruto. "I must admit I was not sure what sort of reception I would receive."

Naruto knew exactly what Sarutobi was referring to. "Afraid you'd have a little 'accident' on the way here?"

"I confess the thought had crossed my mind," Sarutobi admitted.

"You and the Sand nins are the ones who keep sending assassins after me. In the entire time since I left the village I haven't sent even one of my ninja after anyone inside Konoha. I've done my best to behave honorably."

"Does that include what you did to Sasuke and Kakashi?" Sarutobi asked coolly.

Naruto just wagged a finger at him. "Uh, uh old man you don't get to call me on that when I was attacked by the ANBU *before* I did anything. I know how much you and Konoha love to play the part of innocent victim, but we both know that meeting was a sham from the start. The only question was whose trap would work better. Don't complain to me just because yours failed and mine didn't."

"The offer I made was genuine Naruto," he sounded weary and heartsick. "I never would have allowed it to go forward if I had known you no longer felt a connection to your former teammates."

"What are you talking about old man? I let Kakashi live didn't I? Do you think I would have done that if I didn't still have a little bit of feeling for my old team?"

"Then what about Sasuke?"

"I considered Sasuke a friend," Naruto said. "But I had to use him to achieve my goal."

Naruto continued to smile as he said that and there was nothing in his voice or manner to suggest he was bothered by the admission. To use others to achieve your ends was a part of ninja life. Even so, Sarutobi found it hard to stomach. "That is not the way of the Leaf Naruto; we do not sacrifice our own so casually."

Naruto tilted his head a bit as he stared at the other man. "Our own? I haven't been a Leaf nin in a long time."

He decided to look past the two guards at the two Jonin who accompanied him. One he didn't recognize, but the other was familiar.

"Kiba! Long time no see! I almost didn't recognize you without Akamaru. I haven't seen you since kicking your ass back in the preliminaries."

The Inuzuka let out a low growl. "I think you should know that the only reason I don't rip you apart is that I'm under orders not to."

In an instant a perfect circle of kunai fell around him. All the other members of the Sound Seven were sending him warning looks.

Naruto took no offense and laughed it off. "Well I can see you haven't changed any since the academy. I assume you have some secret messages for Hinata?"

Kiba was able to keep any expression of fear or worry from his face but Naruto caught the slightest whiff of it in his scent and knew he'd

hit the mark.

"You can give them to her; I'm not going to stop you or ask to read them first. You can also tell the Hyuuga that if they want to contact her they can use the regular post. Why don't you go ahead and talk to her? I'm sure she'd love the chance to catch up with an old teammate."

"I would," Hinata spoke up eagerly.

Kiba glanced at Sarutobi and at the Third Lord's slight nod he went over to speak in private with her.

"Why don't we head over to the Tower now?" Naruto asked politely.

"Yes, let's," Sarutobi agreed.

As Hinata and Kiba wandered off to talk Naruto and Sarutobi began to casually walk down the street side by side. Tsunade walked with them, looking unhappy and grim. The Sound Seven spread out wide to give them plenty of room and to keep watch over them from every angle. As they walked Naruto's bodyguards did not try to clear a path for them. Without being ordered to the civilians and Oto nin they came across automatically provided and wide berth.

Sarutobi was caught off guard by the lack of fear in the people they passed. Again and again, civilians and ninja alike would call out to Naruto with a friendly wave saying hello or wishing him a good morning. For his part Naruto would always respond, answering and returning the greetings.

"Otokage -sama!" A group of young children approached them with no fear at all. A little girl of perhaps seven or eight was out in front of them calling to him. "Come and play with us!"

Laughing Naruto nodded. "Sure Yukari-chan." He ran through some hand signs and a shadow clone puffed into life. The children all gave a loud cheer as the clone went off to play with them.

Naruto could see the old man's amazement.

"They're orphans," he explained. "We have the best run and best funded orphanage in the Elemental Lands. I play with the kids every single day and I make sure they're being well treated and well fed. I know how rough it can be so I try and make sure none of them are ever lonely." He sounded very proud.

"I see. I will admit to being most surprised at the way the people accept you," Sarutobi replied carefully. "Their affections seem genuine."

Naruto had no trouble understanding what lay underneath the underneath. "You shouldn't believe your own propaganda. What were you expecting? The whole village cowering in fear? Them running away at the very sight of me? Why would they? I am their *Kage* their leader and protector. A Kage lives to guide and protect his village. Why on earth would they be afraid of me? This is how the villagers and nin in Konoha treated you. Did you really expect it to be different?" His smile remained but his eyes took on a bitter cast. "People don't hate me here, this *isn't* Konoha you know. No one here goes around thinking the Kyuubi is suddenly going to burst out of me."

"It is good that the people have faith in you Naruto," Sarutobi said quietly. "But even you will admit there are reasons why I might wonder about that." His face twisted in distaste. "I know something about your research facilities and the sorts of things that go on there."

"Those projects have nothing to do with the village or the villagers."

"Everything that touches a Kage must affect the village to some degree."

"Sure," Naruto said. "Now tell me that in all the years you ran the village you never once did anything you'd be ashamed to tell to the civilians."

Sarutobi grimaced slightly. "I will not claim to have been any sort of saint. It is impossible to be the leader of a ninja village whose purpose for existence is violence and not commit certain crimes. When it was for the benefit of the village I did not hesitate to commit all sorts of cruelty."

Naruto nodded, he was glad the old man was at least being honest about how things really were. "Assassinations, kidnappings, arson, espionage, blackmail, the list goes on and on doesn't it? I know how it is. Every Kage has to wear two faces; the one they show to the people and the one they have in private. Growing up I always saw you as a kindly grandfather the way most people did. I would never have imagined you sitting in your office going over lists deciding if a certain monk or business man needed to be killed or needed to be threatened. The truth is a Kage can't afford to be a really good person."

"Perhaps not," Sarutobi admitted. "Yet we can still hold ourselves up to a certain ethical standard. Some things are wrong and simply cannot be excused."

"Oh? You mean like butchering an entire clan and then allowing your loyal ninja to take the blame for it? Like letting an innocent child suffer years of abuse because it's simpler than trying to force an entire village into acting like decent human beings? Like sending assassins out after a fellow Kage? I have done none of those things, but you have. It seems to me where you draw that line is all a matter of personal choice. Don't condemn me for doing what is best for my village just as you did."

Sarutobi appeared fearful. He glanced over at Tsunade and spoke in a low voice. "How... how did you know?"

"You mean about the Uchiha?" Naruto answered in the same low voice. "Don't underestimate my intelligence network. I have eyes and ears in the most interesting places."

"I see," when he returned to Konoha he would need to talk to Danzo about going through and investigating not only the entire government. Their security had obviously been badly compromised. "What happened at that time was very difficult; I felt I had no choice but to..."

"I'm not Sasuke, you don't need to justify anything to me," Naruto told him. "My point is just that the village would be shocked to know that the kindly Hokage was the sort of man who could have women and children massacred right inside the village. *Every* ninja village has its dark side and its secret places. Don't try to pretend I'm somehow unique."

"Other villages don't use human beings for experimentation."

Naruto laughed. "Now we both know *that's* a lie. Prisoners and criminals get used for that all the time, even in Leaf. The only difference is that I'm doing it more efficiently and on a bigger scale."

"That is not something to be proud of Naruto! You must shut down those vile camps of yours and end whatever revolting research you are pursuing!"

Naruto came to a sudden stop and turned fully on Sarutobi. "Or what?" He demanded. "You'll send me to my room without supper? You'll send assassins after me? You'll declare war without actually doing anything? Don't threaten me old man! I'm not the one who came here to beg for mercy! You are! Don't push your luck or you won't be going back!!" Naruto was yelling at the top of his lungs.

Sarutobi stood there calmly facing a furious Naruto without so much as blinking.

Tsunade came over to him and very carefully touched his arm drawing his attention away from Sarutobi and on to her. "Please calm down Otokage, I'm sure the old man didn't mean any offense."

Naruto took a deep breath and visibly reined himself back in. When he looked back at the former Hokage his eyes were considering and judging. Naruto knew he'd made a very big mistake. The leader of a great village didn't suddenly lose his temper like that. Talking to the old man again after all this time was bringing back a lot of hard feelings. He resented like hell that lecturing tone, Sarutobi was not here to act as his protector. He was here to beg, nothing else.

"Sorry about that Third Lord," he gave the man a respectful bow. "Please forgive, my rude outburst."

"It's quite all right," Sarutobi murmured.

They began walking again.

"The request Danzo sent me specifically asked for a private meeting between you and Tsunade as well as one between us. When we get to the Tower why don't I let you and her talk?"

"That would be much appreciated Otokage-sama."

The rest of the way to the Tower they chattered about unimportant things. The meaningful words would wait until later.

Hinata and Kiba were walking together down a side street. If they were being followed Kiba couldn't pick out any particular scent.

"Here Hinata-chan, this was written for you by your sister Hanabi. She's clan head now."

"Thank you Kiba-kun," she took the sealed letter and slipped it into a pocket.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Kiba asked in surprise. He'd expected her to tear it open in front of him.

"I'll read it later Kiba-kun; I already know what's in it. Hanabi would be writing to me as clan head not as a sister. I'm sure she'll remind

me of my duties to clan and village and tell me I should try to escape."

Kiba nodded. He hadn't read the thing but he'd been given a verbal message from Hanabi to deliver in case the letter was confiscated. "Hanabi and the rest of the clan still scream at the top of their lungs that you were kidnapped and are being held here against your will."

She grinned at her old teammate. "Do you think that too Kiba-kun?"

"Are you kidding? As many times as I saw you faint?" She giggled. "I know you were in love with him."

"I *am* in love with him Kiba-kun. I am his wife now, Uzumaki Hinata, and I love him now more than ever."

"He killed your father Hinata, and my mother too," Kiba spoke with a snarl. "How can you still love him after all the things he's done?"

"Please don't pretend he was not forced to abandon Konoha. All Naruto-kun ever wanted was to be treated like any other ninja of the village. You know what it was like for him; you saw how the people were. Then after winning the Chunin Selection Exams the one person he trusted most betrayed him."

"Wow Naruto's got you well trained, how long did it take you to get all that crap memorized?"

"Kiba-kun! Please don't be nasty!"

"He killed my mother," Kiba repeated.

"And what would your mother, my father, and the others have done to him? They would have killed him or captured him! He did what he had to." Hinata knew the truth of what had happened that day, but Naruto had told her never to tell anyone of it. Even if she had she knew Kiba would not believe it and just think she was making excuses for Naruto.

"Hinata-chan," Kiba spoke trying his best to sound like the easy going boy who had been her teammate. "There are more important things at stake than just your feelings. The future of Konoha is in the balance. You need to make a choice! If it's impossible for you to escape then at least give me what information you have about Naruto and about his plans."

"Kiba-kun, please don't ask me to betray my husband. Naruto-kun has loved me and protected me; he has made me happier than I have ever been." *In spite of the things I have to do for him.* "I love him more now than I ever have, certainly more than I ever loved my father or sister."

"More than you love Konoha and all your friends? More than me, Shino, and Kurenai?"

"Yes," she answered with no hesitation. "Much more. Don't ask me to choose Kiba-kun, because I already did, a long time ago."

He looked at her with real sadness. "You've changed Hinata."

She nodded. "Yes I have, and it's all thanks to Naruto-kun. Without him I would still be nothing but the shy quiet girl I was."

"I liked that girl," Kiba told her sadly.

"I never did," Hinata said. "She was always unhappy and crying when she was alone. I like myself now Kiba."

"Then I guess there's nothing for us to talk about is there?"

"If you want to talk to me as a friend about old times and about our lives then we can. If all you want is to pour poison in my ear then it's best for you to just go."

Miserably he nodded and stopped walking with her. He stood there and watched her go.

She didn't once hesitate or turn back.

The very best offer

The Tower of Sound was as far as he eye could see an exact copy of the Tower of Fire.

"Except that it's fifty feet higher," Naruto said.

"I am not surprised," Sarutobi said. "he always wanted to out do everything that came before him."

Naruto and Tsunade both nodded at that.

"In any case the floor plan is exactly the same," Naruto said. "Why don't you and Tsunade use the conference room on the second floor? Whenever you're done come up to my office and we can talk."

"You don't object to my being alone with Tsunade?" Sarutobi asked.

"Nope, I don't think you plan to overpower her and I'm not afraid she'll turn on me." He sent Sarutobi an amused grin. "Oh, and you should know every room in the Tower is monitored except for my offices. If you want real privacy you can use a sealing jutsu, I don't mind." Naruto and his bodyguards headed down the corridor leaving Sarutobi and Tsunade on their own.

Sarutobi watched him depart with sad eyes. "I always suspected he would make a great leader some day."

"Does seeing you were right make you happy or sad?" Tsunade asked.

"Let's go to the conference room so that we can sit down and talk."

Tsunade noted that he had avoided the question, but did not press him on it.

In the conference room Sarutobi performed a series of hand signs to activate a sealing jutsu that would interrupt and electronic monitoring devices and block any scrying jutsus. (The secretary who was looking through an ordinary peephole and listening was not affected.)

Tsunade took a seat across from him at the table and spoke first. "I honestly don't know what you think you're playing at old man. No matter what you say my answer is going to be no."

"Tsunade," he lowered himself into his chair. The long journey had left him stiff and sore. *I am much too old for this*, he thought. Sadly there was no one else who could perform this particular task. "I know that you feel the village robbed you of those you loved most, but I beg you to remember all the ordinary and decent folk of Konoha. Remember the place that was home to you and was the life's achievement of your grandfather and grand uncle. I know the losses of Nawaki and Dan were tragic, but a ninja village cannot survive unless its ninja are ready to make the sacrifices necessary to protect it and its people. Nawaki and Dan were both Leaf shinobi and they understood this and were ready to make that sacrifice."

"Don't talk lightly of sacrifice old man, it really pisses me off." Tsunade said angrily. "My grandfather, my grand uncle, my little brother, the man I loved, and the whole Senju clan are gone. All for what? So that Konoha can exist and make money by killing and hurting people? What did they die for exactly? So that Fire country could have its own ninja village?" She shook her head violently. "Some things just aren't worth the price."

"You did not always feel that way," Sarutobi reminded her gently. "There was a time when you believed in the village and what it stood for, when you fought to protect it."

"You mean back when I was young and naive," she shook her head. "These are the same arguments you used when I first left. They didn't work then what makes you think they would work now?"

"The situation now is fundamentally different from what it was then," Sarutobi told her. "Back when you originally left it was to wander and escape your memories. You were turning your back not only on Konoha, but also on the entire ninja world. That is no longer the case. By abandoning your home village and serving Oto and its Otokage you have betrayed Konoha."

She shrugged. "If you want to place me on the missing nin list feel free. Just make sure any hunter nins you send after have their wills in order."

"Tsunade can you at least explain to me how you can justify this decision? When you originally left it was because you rejected the philosophy of shinobi and of the villages. How can you resent Konoha but serve Oto? Do you truly believe them to be somehow better?"

"No," she said flatly. "I am long past seeing anything noble in the work of the villages." She shut her eyes for an instant and allowed a small shudder to pass through her. "I will even admit to you that serving Naruto sickens me at times. I don't know what he was like before, but he reminds me of Orochimaru. Clever, patient, and utterly ruthless about getting what he wants. Do you remember when he spoke of wearing two faces? The face you saw today with the villagers was genuine; he really does want to protect Oto and its people. But he had another face he doesn't let the world see. When I look at *that* face I can well believe he is the Kyuubi. There's a part of him that really enjoys killing and hurting people. That part of him truly is a monster."

"How can you serve him then?" Sarutobi asked. He just did not understand it.

"My reasons are selfish," she answered. "He has promised me something I want in exchange for my services and my loyalty."

"If this is about his paying your debts..."

"You think I would get involved with this for money?" She asked with a sneer.

"Then what is it he is offering you? Danzo assures me Konoha will offer you anything if you will return to your old home."

Sadly she shook her head. "I'm sorry old man, but it's not something that you have to offer up."

"What is it then?"

"I'd rather not say."

Sarutobi gave a weary sigh. "Tsunade, please reconsider. Even when we disagreed I never had anything but the highest respect for you and for your beliefs. You told me once that the village's goal should be to preserve life, not take it. You battled against me to create a Medical Corps because you wanted to make healing and saving our ninja a priority even if it meant weakening the village's striking power. You have always believed in saving lives. You *must* know the sorts of things that are happening in the research facilities of Rice country. If you serve Naruto then you are supporting those abominations. Can you accept being a part of that?"

She actually felt relief at the fact he did not know just how deeply involved she was in those experiments. As an expert medic nin she had been given charge of conducting experiments using chakra and jutsus. It sickened her, but she still conducted the experiments and then neatly wrote down the results. She told herself they would have happened if she were not there anyway. She told herself she had to do it for Nawaki and Dan, that returning them to life justified any price. "I know, but I can accept it."

Sarutobi noticed as she went through the motions of dry washing her hands. He didn't think she was even aware she was doing it. Ninja were trained to give no sign of what they were feeling. For a ninja of her ability to do such a thing was clear sign that whatever she was doing was weighing heavily on her.

"Can you really accept being a part of all this?"

"Sure, it doesn't bother me at all."

She again acted as though washing her hands.

"What will you do if he chooses to attack us?" Sarutobi asked in a hushed voice. "The day he abandoned the village he killed many innocent people blowing up various buildings. He has never made any secret of the fact he longs for vengeance against not only me but against all of Konoha. What will you do if he decides to march out against us? Will you stand by and do nothing? Will you fight at his side and kill helpless women and children?"

"I will do whatever he tells me to," she answered looking very unhappy. "I wouldn't like it old man, but I've decided to do anything I have to get what he's promised me."

"Then it would appear Naruto is not the only one who has taken after Orochimaru." He looked and sounded like a disappointed father.

She squirmed in her seat and felt like a 12 year old again. "That's a low blow old man."

"Perhaps, but it seems accurate to me." Tiredly he pushed his seat back and stood. "Thank you for talking with me Tsunade. I think I will go and talk to Naruto now."

Out in the countryside of Rice four figures in black robes and red clouds moved about in the darkness. One of them looked out at the land with the sharingan and calmly wondered what he would say to his father and other relatives when he met them in the land of the dead.

"I thought you would like to know," the ninja in the ANBU mask said to Kakashi.

He nodded his head and gave a false smile. "Thank you I do appreciate it."

The ANBU waved a hand in acknowledgement and was gone.

"Sakura," he said beneath his breath. "I asked you not to do anything stupid. Disappearing from the village definitely counts."

When the door to his office opened Naruto waved Sarutobi over to the chair in front of his desk. Offering the former Hokage a seat was a kind gesture on Naruto's part, but he did not rise to his feet as he would have for an equal. As soon as Sarutobi had seated himself Naruto began with a smirk.

"This kind of brings back memories doesn't it? You and me in a Kage's office? Though the roles are reversed of course."

"As I recall when you were in my office it was usually because you were in some sort of trouble."

Naruto's smile had a little bit of cruelty to it as he replied. "Or else I was there to beg for some favor. That is why you're here now isn't it? To beg? Go ahead; I think I'd really enjoy hearing it."

"I am not here to beg Naruto," Sarutobi spoke with a dignified tone. "I was sent here as a special envoy in hopes of establishing a dialogue with you and entering into negotiations."

"I know the official reason why you're here." He picked up the original message and waved it about. "The Fifth Hokage seeks an accommodation with the leader of Oto for a restoration of normal relations between the two villages." He spoke from memory without bothering to look at the message. "That bastard Danzo doesn't even acknowledge me as a Kage."

"I am sure the slight was made unintentionally," Sarutobi replied smoothly.

It was a blatant lie and hey both knew it, but diplomacy often required blatant lies.

"By a return to normal relations I assume he's referring to the fact that we're technically at war with each other. Though you'd never know it, since the Leaf doesn't have the guts to do anything beyond send assassins after me."

"I decided that an actual invasion of Rice would have led to untold numbers of casualties and that restraint was called for. Given your actions in the village and at the Valley of the End declaring war once Oto decided to shelter you was unavoidable."

"You didn't attack because you knew you'd lose," Naruto told him. "You still wanted me dead; you just knew you couldn't win an actual war."

"That was not the case Naruto," Sarutobi calmly replied. "Many within the clans were screaming for an invasion to destroy you and Orochimaru both. Suna would have marched with us to avenge Orochimaru's murder of their Kazekage."

"Did you know that the Kazekage and Orochimaru were planning a sneak attack on Konoha? It was to take place during the finals of the Chunin Exams."

Sarutobi slowly nodded. If Naruto knew then there was no reason to try and keep it secret. "We'd had signs that something was in the air and that it might be an attack. We did not learn of the details until much later."

"Did you know that Gaara was the one tail's jinchuuriki? The attack was supposed to start simultaneously with his transformation at the Arena. Orochimaru called it off at the very last minute because I killed him and because he realized he would be up against the power of the Kyuubi. I saved Konoha because of what I did that day!" He shouted at him. "I **saved** all of you and what was my thanks?! To be betrayed by the one person I trusted the most! How

could you do that to me when I trusted you?!" His fists came down slamming into his desk. "I should have been treated like a hero damn it!"

Sarutobi was shocked as for the second time he witnessed Naruto completely losing his temper. Having survived countless attempts on his life and years as Orochimaru's apprentice he'd expected he boy to have better emotional control. He did not allow any of these concerns to appear on his face.

"I did not know that at the time Naruto," he answered easily. "I never considered my actions to be any sort of betrayal of you. You must realize the effect of your releasing so much of the Kyuubi's chakra in the midst of the village in the most public manner possible. That coupled with your brutal killings of both Gaara and Neji convinced many people that the Fox had gained control or at least influence over you and that we were all in danger. Had I not acted to curb their fears I likely would have had the civilians and the shinobi calling for your death or imprisonment."

Hearing Sarutobi talk so calmly and rationally only drove the point home to Naruto that he needed to calm down. A Kage didn't keep losing his temper like this. *Seeing him again really wears on my nerves, it's like all the old wounds are getting reopened.* He took a deep breath and forced himself to sit back and at least look relaxed.

He lowered his head. "I apologize for my rudeness, please forgive me."

"Of course."

Naruto took another deep breath. "You didn't know I'd saved Konoha. What you *did* know was that I'd won the Chunin Selection Exams and hadn't broken any of the rules. Gaara slaughtered three rain nin and crippled Rock Lee. Neji tried to kill Hinata and came way too close to doing it. Neither of them were punished. But like always I was the only one who was made to suffer. You refused to promote me even though I'd earned it, and what was worse you were going to

leash me. You were going to seal away most of my power to make everyone else happy. Tell me Sarutobi, can you name me one other ninja who was ever punished for being too strong? If you can name me just one maybe I'll feel a little better about things."

Sarutobi knew there was no such example available. From the moment a shinobi began to train he was taught to become as strong as possible and to bend every effort towards that goal.

"I am very sorry Naruto. The only thing I can tell you is that you were a special case."

"Tell me about it," he said with bitterness in his voice. "What a shame special doesn't always equate to good."

"Naruto, I know I made mistakes. If it were possible to go back in time I would do many things differently. I can only offer you my apologies and seek to learn from those mistakes." Sarutobi rose to his feet and gave the seated Naruto a formal bow. "I am sorry Naruto."

"Do you think you bending your back and speaking a few words makes any difference at all old man?"

"I can offer you nothing more Naruto."

"How about your life?" Naruto asked him. "What would you do if I told you that if you cut your own throat open for me right here and now I'd make peace with Konoha?"

"If my life would bring peace to my village then I would gladly offer it to you."

Naruto gave him a ghost of a smile. He hadn't expected any other answer. "Forget it; your scrawny neck isn't worth near that much. You want to know the terms I'm willing to offer Konoha?"

"Yes, that is the reason I am here."

"Two words: unconditional surrender."

"Is that a joke Naruto?"

"Nope," he spoke sounding utterly serious. "Have Danzo surrender unconditionally to me and offer me his place as Hokage. I'll hold the titles of both Otokage and Hokage and rule both villages from here. I'll send Tsunade there to act as my regent. All leaf nins and all civilian residents will be required to kneel before me and publicly swear allegiance to me. All ninja who refuse will be treated as missing nin and expelled from the village. All civilians who refuse will have their property confiscated and be expelled from the village. I'll treat all those who kneel and swear the same as I treat my people here."

"Those terms are completely unacceptable and I am authorized to reject them on behalf of the village."

"Fine then, those are the best terms you will ever get from me. If you reject them there is nothing more to discuss."

"This is not how you negotiate Naruto."

"It is when you have all the power," he replied. "Just remember I can crush the Leaf like that if I want." He snapped his fingers.

"If you truly believe that why have you not done so? You talked about Konoha not waging a real war, but Oto has not done so either."

Naruto shrugged. "I can be patient when I need to. When the day comes that I do decide to move it won't be a war, it'll be a massacre. That's why you should accept my terms now. I'll only show mercy if you submit to me. If I have to conquer the place I'll burn it to the ground."

Sarutobi felt a chill fall over his heart. He did not doubt that Naruto believed what he was saying.

"Think about it for a few days and enjoy my hospitality," Naruto said sounding like the cheerful fun loving boy he had been once.

"Very well," he said and got to his feet. Even if there was little hope he would try to get Naruto to soften his terms to something that might at least seem reasonable enough to pass on to the Hokage.

Welcome back

Author's Note: No, your eyes do not deceive you. Yes, this is an update to my story **The Paths We Choose** . There is no way I could ever find the time to properly complete this story, but I figured I could at least give it an ending, even an imperfect one. Needless to say, there has been a long time skip from the previous chapter. I apologize for the confusion, but bear with it as I bring this story to a conclusion.

Sakura was chained down to the table, hands, feet, elbows, knees, hips, and neck. Except to turn her face she would hardly be able to move. The seals were chalked into the floor and onto notes attached to her. The last time he'd seen her she'd been twelve, she was eighteen now and a very attractive woman. She was dressed in traditional black ninja gear, except for the hood which had been removed. Naruto noted she had let her hair grow long, he liked it.

"You and the guards can go."

Haku bowed his head in obedience. "Are you certain, Otokage-sama?"

"While we're in Konoha I'll be going by Hokage, and yes, I'm sure."

"There could be other assassins Hokage-sama, you have many enemies here."

"That's true everywhere, Haku. It's fine, I can take care of myself."

"Hai, Hokage-sama." Haku bowed and led the guards out of the room.

Naruto was dressed in orange and black robes that went all the way down to his ankles. His hood was up, there were black gloves on his hands, and a fox ANBU mask covered his face. Naruto strolled to the

side of the table to allow Sakura to look up at him without needing to strain. She looked up into his mask with those green eyes of hers, her mouth was a flat line. He gave her credit for appearing calm. Her scent was nothing but terror and sorrow. Naruto still thought her eyes were pretty, back in his academy days they were what had first drawn him to her.

"I have to tell you Sakura-chan, black is not your color. Red suits you a lot better."

Her lips remained sealed.

"Bet you wish you could just scream 'baka' and punch like you used to, huh?"

"I'd do a lot worse than punch you if I could."

Naruto wagged a single finger at her. "Shame on you, Sakura-chan. Is that any way to talk to your Hokage?"

"You're not the Hokage!"

"I'm pretty sure that I am, Sakura-chan."

"You don't become Hokage just because you say you are."

"No," Naruto agreed. "You become Hokage when you conquer the village and they surrender to you."

"You haven't won yet! I believe in the will of fire! They'll find a way to stop you!"

Naruto tilted his head slightly. "They? Who is they? Who do you think is going to stop me? Danzou is dead. The Council is dead. The ANBU are dead. The clans are smashed. Half the leaf nins are dead. Who's left?"

"As long as there's even one ninja who believes there'll be someone to fight you."

"Someone like you I suppose."

She glared up at him but didn't answer.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Sakura-chan. But if they're counting on you or someone like you to take me down, the village is screwed. Here, let me show you something."

From one of the pockets of his robe Naruto pulled out a kunai. There was a sharp rise in the fear scent and eyes locked on the knife. Underneath his mask Naruto grinned. He held his left hand out palm up, then slashed the kunai straight down towards it. Before the tip of the blade could touch his glove that section of his hand was covered in red chakra. Naruto tried to stab himself in the forearm, the thigh, the belly, and even the chest. Each time the red chakra would pop out of his body to shield that section.

"I never turn off the Kyuubi's chakra. I have an absolute defense. Did you honestly think you could assassinate me? Itachi, Kakashi, Jiraiya, and Pein all failed and they were all S-ranked." Naruto stabbed up towards his throat as hard as he could. The red chakra again blocked it. "I can't even kill me, Sakura. What chance would someone like you have?"

He threw the kunai away. Why did he even bother to still carry them? How many years had it been since he'd actually had to use one in combat? He supposed it was something done out of habit. He seemed to be doing a lot of things that didn't really have a point. Why was he bothering to call himself Hokage? It had been his dream for a long time, he'd wanted the village to acknowledge him. Well they did. He'd had all the survivors, shinobi and civilian, kneel and swear allegiance to him. His troops patrolled the streets and garrisoned Konoha now. This village was his, and he didn't need a stupid title to make it so.

For just a moment Naruto thought about Sarutobi. He still didn't understand why the old man had died trying to protect him from Itachi. The Third had betrayed him and died for him. Why? In the

world of ninja you did not die defending your enemy. As much as he hated Sarutobi, he could not remember the old man without remembering all the times the Hokage had brought food or visited to tell him a story or just listened to him whine. Those small acts of kindness that had meant everything to a lonely orphan. Naruto couldn't make himself forget the reason he had loved the old man in the first place. Naruto could never think of the old Hokage without that mix of fondness, love, and bitter resentment. As silly as it was, Naruto suspected he wanted the title of Hokage as much for Sarutobi's memory as for himself.

"Every defense has a weakness," Sakura spoke. "No one can be invulnerable all the time. The key is always to find the weak point and exploit it."

"Is that you talking or someone else?"

She snarled and tried to look fierce. Well... as fierce as a girl with pink hair can when she's chained down to a table.

"Your mouth moves and I swear I could hear Shikamaru's voice."

Sakura did not respond.

"He survived the battle. Obviously, he was smart enough not to attack me when I had eight tails. My men confirm that a Jonin fitting his description was spotted afterwards. He wasn't one of the ninja who surrendered and swore though."

"Would you have let him live if he had?"

Naruto shrugged. "No. Since I killed Jiraiya he's been the one leading Konoha's efforts against me. He's not a real threat like Jiraiya was, but there's no reason to let him live. He didn't abandon the village, did he? He's still in Konoha."

"I'll never tell you!"

"You don't need to, the answer's written all over your face."

"You're worried about him because you know he's dangerous."

"Not really, I'm just thorough."

"You can do whatever you want to me but I won't betray him! No matter how much pain you inflict I'll never talk!"

Naruto gave a throaty laugh, it didn't sound completely human. "People always say that before the torture sessions start, but never after. You wouldn't be any different Sakura, believe me. But I'm not going to. What would be the point? There's no way Shikamaru would have trusted you with his plans or location, and I don't enjoy torturing people, that was always Orochimaru's thing. I'm actually a very reasonable person."

"You're a monster!"

"True, but that's beside the point."

Naruto reached down with his right hand. Sakura flinched and shut her eyes. As his gloved fingers slowly went through her locks she gave a little whimper. It was hard to believe this was the same girl who had punched him through walls back in their school days.

"I always liked your hair, Sakura-chan." Even though he couldn't feel it he let his finger run through her hair for a bit. "If you want to beg me for mercy, now would be the time. Go ahead, tell me this isn't the real me and that deep down I'm a good man. Remind me about Team Seven and the good old days."

Sakura forced her eyes open and looked up into his masked face. "Do you remember our first real mission? That little priestess girl, Shizuku?"

Naruto's eyes widened and he pulled his hand back. "I remember."

"You cried for her when she died."

It was now Naruto's turn to be silent.

"It was the first time I really understood what it meant to be a ninja. The first time I ever saw people killed or saw someone interrogated. I saw you use your red chakra, though Sasuke and I didn't know what it was. You ripped a man's heart out of his chest and you threatened to kill every single person in that village. In that moment I was scared of you."

"I'm sure it was quite a revelation, the clumsy idiot turning out to be a monster."

"I didn't think you were a monster, Naruto, not then. I was shocked at how powerful and ferocious you were, but what I remember just as clearly is you crying for that little girl when no one else would, not even her mother. I thought... I thought 'this is what a ninja is supposed to be.' We can do terrible things when we need to, but we can still be good people. We can still care."

Naruto stared down into her green eyes with his red ones. "Is this where you tell me it's not too late for me to change?"

"We both know it's much too late. You betrayed the village, you murdered Sasuke, you've performed forbidden jutsus, and burned whole countries to the ground. You are drenched in blood, nothing you do could ever make you clean again."

"Huh, well, I won't tell you you're wrong. It isn't making me feel real merciful though."

"After the things you've done I wouldn't expect mercy. I just wanted to remind you of your humanity, and of a time when you still cared about others. Tell me something Naruto, is there anyone who still matters to you?"

Yes, but it was a short list. "Hinata."

Sakura's eyebrows jumped. "But she's already-"

"Don't," he growled. "Don't say another word unless you want me to show you just how much a human body can endure. I only need you to be alive."

She swallowed audibly. "What are you going to do to me?"

"It's funny how you brought up Shizuku, you're going to be a sacrifice, like she was. If it helps, at least your death will have meaning."

"Do you think that was a comfort to her when her mother killed her?"

Naruto reached down and picked up the kunai he'd discarded earlier. He didn't need it as a weapon these days, but it still had its uses. "Maybe it did, but she wasn't a ninja. Remember the very first lesson Iruka ever taught us?"

Sakura nodded. "Every ninja must be ready to kill or die for the sake of the village."

Even though she had tried to kill him, Naruto didn't hate Sakura. Hatred had become his food. Hatred of the villagers, of Sarutobi, of Jiraiya, of Danzou, of Itachi, of Akatsuki, hatred of the whole damn world, sometimes. The constant need for revenge, to destroy the ones who'd betrayed him, had pushed him forward from one battle to the next. He couldn't even remember if there'd been a time when he wasn't filled with unlimited hate and rage. Maybe back when he was still young and dumb enough to believe the world could be fair.

Sakura had somehow avoided his list. She'd been a brat to him in the academy, but he'd gotten over it during their short time together on Team Seven. She'd surrendered and sworn like most of the other survivors. Naruto had planned to leave her alone. But she'd come into the Tower and tried to kill him. You couldn't let that sort of thing go, it made a bad example for people.

"I'll give you a clean death Sakura, no torture, and no unnecessary pain."

"Thank you."

For the first time the fear smell died down. What was coming from her now was resignation. She must have known from the moment she set out this was the likely outcome. A quick death was the most she could hope for.

"I'll even grant you one last act of kindness. When Sasuke and Kakashi came to meet me in secret, you betrayed them to Shikamaru, didn't you?"

She nodded as much as the chains about her neck allowed. "I thought I was helping Sasuke, I knew you couldn't be trusted."

"You've always blamed yourself for what happened haven't you?"

"Yes, if I hadn't-"

"It made no difference, Sakura. The second I agreed to the meeting I was planning to capture him. If you hadn't told Shikamaru it would have just made it easier for me."

"Really?"

"Yep."

She let out a breath and seemed to relax. "Thank you, Naruto-kun."

"You're welcome, Sakura-chan."

The runes and inscriptions and tags were already in place. He began edo tensei. The inscriptions began to glow and the various tags started to shake and flap. Naruto took the knife and cut Sakura's throat, right above where the chains held her in place. The blood squirted up and the sharp coppery and salty tang stung his senses. There were no last words or tears from Sakura, just a choking gurgle as the light exited her eyes.

The tags wrapped themselves around the boy. Dust and ash materialized and covered Sakura's corpse, hiding it from view. The material shaped itself into a different form. Naruto watched patiently as the jutsu worked. The ash and dust thickened into a greyish 'skin.' The face, chest, arms, legs, all transformed. Small cracks formed along the surface. Try as he might, Naruto couldn't make the new form perfect. There were always imperfections. The jutsu was called impure world reincarnation for a reason.

Naruto was painfully aware of the limitations of this technique, and that it was not possible to truly restore the dead to life.

Eventually the jutsu was complete. The eyes opened and someone stared up at him in confusion. Naruto gently patted his shoulder.

"Welcome back, Sasuke."

The price

There was a crack that ran from just below Sasuke's left ear to his jaw line. He was sure that there were other blemishes beneath the clothing Sasuke was wearing.

"Who are you?" Sasuke's eyes darted about the room. The chains jangled as he tried to free himself.

"I'm Naruto."

The eyes snapped back and the mouth fell open. "Where am I? What-"

"You're feeling confused. That's normal, just give it a moment."

Sasuke paused in his struggles. His eyes lost focus. "Orochimaru, he was going to try and take over my body."

"Yes."

"So his jutsu failed."

"No, it didn't."

"What do you mean?" Sasuke demanded.

"You died, more than four years ago."

Sasuke's mouth went slack and his eyes widened. "Then how-"

"I brought you back with a forbidden jutsu called edo tensei. You're not truly alive any more, Sasuke. You don't have a beating heart or blood flowing through your veins. You'll be able to remember things from your life, and you have a functioning chakra system. You'll be able to use jutsus."

"Is that why you brought me back? To use me as a tool?"

Naruto shook his head. "You're here because I missed you. I just wanted my friend back."

"You're the one who killed me, Naruto. Orochimaru delivered the blow, but you captured me and gave me poison."

"Yeah, sorry about that."

Sasuke glared at him.

"Would it help if I told you I kept the promise I made to you? We're in Konoha, inside the Tower of Fire. There were a lot of deaths when I took this place, but when they surrendered I did spare them."

"So you really did attack the village?"

"That's right," Naruto growled. "It was war and I ended it. The only reason I didn't burn this whole place to ash was because of the promise I made you."

"Are you expecting me to give you credit for that?"

"Not really, though it would be nice."

"How could you do it? You grew up here! Konoha was your home! You knew the people who lived here!"

"Yeah, I know them, I know them better than you ever did. Trust me, it made attacking this place easy. Don't think for a second Konoha was innocent. The village attacked me every way it could."

"After you attacked them first."

"BULLSHIT! I never asked to be persecuted or treated like a monster! Even Sarutobi treated me that way in the end. And Jiraiya! He-"
Naruto abruptly cut off. He didn't want to remind himself.

"He what?"

"He committed war crimes, he did things that were worse than anything I've ever done."

"I don't believe you."

"That's fine, I'm not really expecting you to. You blame me and I blame the village. In the end what does it matter? I didn't bring you here to convince you I'm right. I just want us to be friends again."

"You expect me to just forget everything and pretend it never happened?"

"I could compel you to if I wanted. Hell, I could make you dance a jig if I wanted. But I won't, what would be the point? I already have tons of folk who kiss my ass and tell me whatever I want to hear. I want you to be you, Sasuke. There was no reason to bring you back if I didn't give you your free will."

Sasuke stared up for a long while. "Take that stupid mask off, I want to look at you face."

"You might not like what you see. I've sort of... changed."

"I don't care."

"Fine," Naruto mumbled. "Try not to get weirded out, okay?"

Naruto pulled down his hood and slid off the mask. Sasuke got a clear view. His eyes widened and gave a low whistle.

"Wow. You're even uglier than you used to be."

"Funny, maybe I will have you put on a show for everyone after all."

Naruto's nose and mouth had stretched out into a snout. His eyes were red and slitted. The hair atop his head was still blonde and spiky, but the rest of his face and neck were covered in bright red fur.

"What happened to you, dobe?"

"I was constantly dealing with assassination attempts and ambushes. So I finally decided to just keep the Kyuubi's chakra active all the time. It protects me, but as you can see, there's a price." Naruto pulled off the glove on his right hand. Each finger ended in a claw. "I even grew a tail. Sometimes if I catch a rabbit's scent I have an overwhelming urge to go hunt it down. I worry that someday I'll be with my men and suddenly go running off on all fours."

"Stop using the chakra then."

Naruto gave a weary shake of his head. "It's too late for that. I can't shut it off, my body has become dependent. Without the Kyuubi's chakra I'd die."

There was a look of deep sadness on Sasuke's face. "I'm sorry."

A dead man pities me, is that really what I've come to? "Don't be, there's nothing to be sorry about." Naruto quickly slid the glove back on. Then put the mask back and lifted his hood. "Everything in life comes with a price, this is just part of it."

"There's more?" Sasuke asked in disbelief.

Naruto chuckled. "A lot has happened since you died, Sasuke. Do you think you can forgive me and be friends with the most hated man in the whole world?"

"If I say no are you going to kill me?"

"No."

Sasuke considered it. The fact he was chained down to a table didn't appear to concern him. "I want to see the village. Let me walk through Konoha and then decide."

"Fine." Naruto began to free him.

Konoha had changed.

Damage was scattered all across the village. There were broken windows and boarded up ones. Walls had sections of brick gouged out or holes punched through. Sasuke saw half a billboard advertising cola, the other half was completely gone. Entire blocks were nothing but rubble. You couldn't even tell where the original buildings had stood. A lot of the village didn't seem to have electricity. There were stores and apartment buildings open without a single light on.

Even though it was the middle of the day the streets were nearly empty. The people who were out walked with their eyes deliberately cast down and their shoulders hunched. They walked all the way over to one side or another. They did everything they could not to draw attention to themselves. As Sasuke went he spotted a total of eleven patrols of Oto nin in their black and white clothing. They had their heads up and were the only ones to use the middle of the streets. When one of their patrols went by everyone else got as far away from them as they could. Seven of the patrols approached him, but they would spot something that would cause them to stop and reconsider.

As Sasuke went a handful of people appeared to recognize him. The usual reaction was for the person to quickly look away and hurry their steps. Sasuke felt he was about as welcome as the foreign ninja. The entire time he was out he did not spot a single leaf nin.

Naruto didn't like meetings. They always seemed like a waste of time to him. You sat around a table and had to listen to others drone on about things you usually didn't care about. His experience as Otokage had taught him to bear with it, they were a necessary evil at times. Fortunately he didn't expect this one to take very long. It was the initial meeting of the new Council. The old one had died along with their Hokage, with one exception.

Hyuuga Hanabi was fourteen and trying very hard to fill out her chair. Her hands were resting on her lap and her chin was jutting up at an angle. It was a good effort at trying to appear regal and indifferent. It was too bad for her that her scent had a sour smell to it, nervousness and uncertainty mixed in with a healthy dose of fear. Except for himself and Tsunade everyone at the meeting was afraid.

Naruto didn't recognize any of the representatives from the clans. All the kids who'd been in the academy with him were dead. Most of them years dead. These were cousins or distant relatives who had survived, and come here to represent what was left of their clans. Hyuuga, Akimichi, Aburame, Yamanaka, and Inuzuka were all in attendance. The seat for the Nara clan was empty. Apparently all the Naras who'd survived the battle had chosen to flee rather than surrender. Chances were the remaining members were already in Suna, hoping to continue the war. Naruto had ordered the family estate searched, but his Oto-nin had discovered nothing. The estate remained under surveillance.

"Thank you all for coming," Naruto got things under way. "Having grown up here, I know how important the clans have always been to the village. I want them to continue to play a part in Konoha's future. As your new Hokage I want your clans to continue to provide ninja as well as be a source of stability. Of course, there are going to need to be a few changes."

The council members stirred slightly in their seats. None of them actually spoke.

"First off, the Lady Tsunade is appointed Vice Kage. When I leave Konoha she will remain here and rule in my name."

Tsunade shifted in her chair and rubbed her hands together. Naruto had known her long enough to know that meant she wanted a drink.

Yamanaka Dita spoke. "Pardon me, Hokage-sama. You won't be remaining with us?" She was Ino's mother. Naruto had killed both Dita's husband and only child. Naruto realized she had every reason

to hate him. But if he only accepted representatives who loved him he doubted he could fill even one seat. Naruto gave her credit for sounding civil and keeping her face empty. But her scent gave the truth away, there was a burst of fragrant eagerness. He picked up the same from all the other members, the strongest from Hanbabi.

Well, I can't really blame them if they hate my guts, just so long as they fear me. "That's right. Once I feel the village is secure I'll be leaving for Suna. Needless to say, I expect all of you to keep the peace," Naruto gave one of his not quite human chuckles. "If the village tries to rebel once I'm gone, if I have to come back here and conquer it again, I promise none of you will enjoy it."

Uncomfortable looks flashed between all of them. Were they *already* conspiring to betray him?

"Let me make something really, really clear," Naruto leaned back in his chair. "The village surrendered to me, and all those still living here have sworn fealty. That means anyone who rebels against my authority is automatically guilty of treason. And I'm sure you all know what the penalty for treason is."

"I am certain no one present would contemplate any such action, Hokage-sama," Aburame Tenzou said. Like all the members of his clan he wore dark sunglasses and spoke in a monotone. His scent was one of worry. Naruto couldn't tell if that was because they had been plotting something or just out of general concern for what he might do.

"Arigato, Tenzou-san, your reassurance puts my mind at ease." Naruto considered having Dita and Tenzou placed under arrest and handed over to the interrogators. There wasn't any evidence against either of them, but given what his life had been like Naruto tended to see conspiracies everywhere. He supposed that would have made him paranoid, except for the fact that so many people really were out to get him.

"Next," Naruto continued. "As a sign of my great interest in the clans I want each of you to provide me with five members who are too young to have begun attendance at the academy. They will be relocated to Oto, where I will allow them to live at the palace and receive instruction from me on the various ninja arts. They'll remain with me until they achieve the rank of Genin, at which point they'll be allowed to return home. My hope is that this program will help all of us to better understand one another."

The stony stares told Naruto that none of them had bought a word of it.

Inuzuka Kouta gripped his hands into fists and let a low growl exit his throat. "You expect each of us to just hand over five children as hostages?"

"I never used that word, think of them as guests."

"And what happens to these guests if we do something you don't like?"

Naruto folded his hands in front of his masked face. "Who knows? I suppose it would depend on how bad the offence is. But so long as you are loyal to me there is nothing to worry about."

"And what will you do if we refuse to give you our children?" Kouta snarled and bared his teeth.

Beneath his mask Naruto smiled. Usually all he ever dealt with was subterfuge and deceit. Everyone lied, everyone had hidden intentions, everyone schemed and plotted. Dealing with some good honest hatred was refreshing.

"Well, to start with, I'll kill you. Then I will send my ninja to your compound and they'll butcher every single person there. Ninja, civilians, servants, guests; everyone, hell, I'll have all your dogs killed too. Then I'll send out my hunter nins to track down and eliminate any person with a drop of Inuzuka blood in their veins. No

matter where they hide, or how far they run, my people will find them and kill them. And when that's done, after I've killed every last person in your clan, I'll burn down your estate and piss on the ashes."

Naruto never raised his voice as he spoke. The words were friendly and carefree. Inuzuka and the rest were staring back at him.

"Does that answer your question, Kouta-san?"

Inuzuka Kouta dry swallowed and answered in a whisper. "Yes."

"Good. Next, the Hyuuga caged bird seal is declared a forbidden jutsu. Anyone who activates it, or places it on a person is sentenced to death. Also, the cadet and main branches of the Hyuuga clan are hereby dissolved. All members are to receive equal rights within the clan. Any member of the Hyuuga who wishes to be emancipated from them will be allowed to leave them and to serve as a regular ninja."

Hanabi's jaw dropped and her mouth hung open. "You cannot do that!"

"And yet I have."

"What you are suggesting goes against all the traditions of my clan!"

Naruto gave an indifferent shrug. "I've never been big on tradition."

"My clan has been separated since before the village was founded. Some must lead, some must serve."

"I agree," Naruto nodded. "You will serve me by making sure my order is obeyed. Oh, and I want at least three of the guests your clan gives me to be from the former cadet branch."

"But-"

"Moving on. Next..."

Naruto laid out several more new laws, all of them aimed at stripping away some of the authority and privileges the clans had always enjoyed. Naruto intended them to be a source of pride with unique blood lines, and a symbol of unity and strength for the villagers and those living abroad. The council members understood exactly what he was doing, but there were no more objections. Perhaps they'd hoped he'd at least want them to be advisors, to influence some of his decisions. If so, Naruto made it clear that wasn't going to be their role. He would never trust any of them. The clans had all served Danzou faithfully, and had fought as hard as they could up until the moment they realized their only choices were surrender or death. They weren't his partners in ruling Konoha, they were servants, like everyone else in this village.

When he finished giving them the new rules they would live by he dismissed the council.

"Hanabi-san, I want you to wait a moment."

She froze as she rose from her seat. The others sent her looks of concern as they departed. Hanabi was quickly alone in the room with Naruto and Tsunade.

"How may I serve you, Hokage-sama?"

"I've taken up residence on the top floor of the Tower. Your sister is there. Hinata wants to see you, go and pay her a visit."

Hanabi sucked in a deep breath. Naruto could see her hands tremble just a bit. "I... I really would rather not."

"I phrased it as a request to be polite, it's not."

There was a long pause. "What am I supposed to say to her?"

"Tell her that you're happy to see her, that you've missed her, and that she looks wonderful. Lie. You're a ninja, surely you can manage that."

Hanabi lowered her eyes and gave a single dispirited nod. "Hai, Hokage-sama."

As she left Hanabi's shoulders were slumped and her feet dragged.

The moment the door closed Tsunade sprang to her feet and rounded on Naruto. "Congratulations! I didn't think it was possible, but you've succeeded in making them hate you even more than they already did!"

"So what? It's not like I could have ever made them love me."

"You could have tried to make a real peace with them. You could have at least started to heal all the old wounds."

"You're the medic-nin, grandma, not me." Naruto rose to his feet. "I don't fix things, I only destroy them."

"What? You think I can fix this?!" Her arms waved about. "I had a great reputation once, now I'm just a traitor. No one is going to listen to me. The only reason things are as peaceful as they are is because everyone is terrified of you. The moment you leave there'll be trouble. What exactly do you expect me to do?"

"Handle it," Naruto said without an ounce of sympathy. "Remind people what I'll do if I have to come back here and put down a revolt."

"Ruling through terror isn't the best way, Naruto!"

"Maybe not, but we use the tools we have. How are Dan and Nawaki?"

The question caused Tsunade to pause. "Need to remind me why I'm loyal to you, brat?"

"I was wondering how they're adjusting to being back in the village."

"They don't like it, all they ever do is talk about how things were before. All that matters to them is the past. They won't change, they can't change."

"I know," Naruto sounded forlorn.

Tsunade rubbed her hands together. "I'm not complaining about it. In spite of everything, I'm still grateful to you. It's just... well..." Tsunade struggled to explain it.

"It's like you're starving to death and all there is to eat is moldy bread. It's not what you want and the taste sickens you, but it's better than nothing."

She gave an unhappy nod. "That does sort of sum it up."

"Do your best. If things fall apart the village will just get what they deserve." Naruto left.

"Damn, but I need a drink."

Naruto didn't return to his quarters until evening. Ever since he'd left the Kyuubi's chakra always active he'd found he didn't need to sleep anymore. Naruto tried to work for as many hours a day as possible. He even welcomed the mundane tasks like paperwork, so long as it kept his mind busy. The quiet hours of the night and early morning were the worst for him. When there was nothing to work on, nothing to distract him, he was forced to remember and think about the choices he'd made.

Sometimes, when things were really quiet, he would hear the Kyuubi's voice, mocking him. Reminding him of his arrogance and his assumption that he would always figure a way out. Naruto had really believed that every problem could be smashed to bits if you only had a big enough hammer. He really had been an idiot.

Life didn't work that way. Every choice you made had consequences, some you never even thought about. And if you did smash a problem into shards, those broken pieces had a nasty way of coming together again later to make a whole new problem.

Even after all the things he'd done, all the crimes and deaths, Naruto still saw himself as the victim. Every horrible decision had an excuse he could point to. If the villagers hadn't hated him, if Iruka had been a good sensei, if the old man hadn't betrayed him, if he hadn't been forced to get rid of Orochimaru, if Danzou hadn't kept attacking him, if Jiraiya hadn't used the Poison Cloud, if Konoha had surrendered sooner, and on and on and on. Every decision he made had a justification, something he could point to.

And look where all those choices had led him.

He was Hokage and everyone acknowledged him. His power was absolute. Not one, but two ninja villages were his. He had all the money, power, and fame anyone could ever hope for. It was everything he'd dreamed of as a lonely orphan.

It wasn't worth it, he thought. The price was too high.

The door to his bedroom opened. "How was your day, Naruto-kun? Are you coming to bed?"

Her scent was of ash and dust and of Tayuya's rotting corpse. There was nothing there of the real her anymore. He didn't turn around right away. He was looking out at the Hokage Monument where five faces stared back. The night he abandoned the village Naruto had destroyed Sarutobi's. It had been rebuilt, not by Sarutobi, but on Danzou's command after the old man was gone. Danzou claimed to have restored it to honor Sarutobi's memory and out of respect for the position of Hokage. Naruto wondered if his face would ever go up on the cliff. It didn't much matter to him one way or the other.

"I don't sleep any more. I haven't for a long while."

"Oh, that's right, I keep forgetting. My sister came to see me today. I can't believe how much she'd grown. She seemed very nervous though, do you know why?"

Sighing Naruto finally turned around. Hinata was wearing white robes with the Hyuuga clan symbol. She was smiling at him and her lavender eyes were content. What Naruto focused on was the crack that ran from the corner of her left eye down to her chin.

"I have no idea, Hinata-chan."

End of the path

When Danzou became the Fifth Hokage he'd had a single overriding priority, to kill Uzumaki Naruto. Danzou considered Naruto not only the worst traitor but the greatest threat the village had ever known. The fifth sent the best of the Black Ops to try and assassinate Naruto. Even the legendary Hatake Kakashi had been given the mission.

They all failed.

Though it was a stain on his personal, and the village's, reputation Danzou turned to elite assassins of other villages. He even hired killers from the criminal organization Akatsuki. Danzou drained Konoha's treasury on assassination attempt after assassination attempt. But no matter what effort the Hokage made Naruto refused to die.

Eventually, Danzou accepted that no assassin or group of assassins would be able to eliminate Naruto. So he decided a different strategy was called for. The Hokage turned to the greatest living seal master and asked him to create a weapon of such destructive power that no one could hope to survive it. A weapon of mass destruction that could succeed where all his previous efforts had failed.

Jiraiya was not happy with the Hokage's idea. But was forced to admit that Naruto was much too dangerous to be allowed to live. The Toad Sage could not come up with a better solution, and so ultimately agreed. And so the great Jiraiya had created the Poison Cloud, an ultimate jutsu that required the caster to sacrifice his life to use it. Jiraiya snuck into Oto and activated it. The village was smothered by a thick green fog, anyone who breathed it in felt their lungs begin to burn. They were soon sprawled out gasping and choking as their airways became inflamed and closed. Some of the Oto-nin managed to escape, but the civilians never had a chance. The attack killed more than forty thousand people, the vast majority

being ordinary villagers. It was a criminal act worse than anything Orochimaru or Naruto had ever committed.

Naruto had been caught in the attack and breathed in the poison like so many others. But the Kyuubi wouldn't let him die. Even as his throat burned the red chakra healed him and allowed him to survive. He hadn't been able to save anyone else. Hinata had died gasping for breath like so many others.

I hope Jiraiya and Danzou are both burning in the deepest pit in Hell right now, Naruto thought. When he'd first realized Hinata was interested in him Naruto had planned to use her. She was supposed to be just another tool. With time though he genuinely fell in love with her. She was the only purely good thing in his life. He couldn't bear to lose her and so had brought her back. At the beginning he pretended it was enough. She understood what had happened to her and accepted it. Hinata still loved him and could still use chakra. She was still always there at his side. Naruto tried to convince himself it was enough.

But when he held her hand or kissed her, her flesh was always cold. Every breath was a reminder this wasn't really Hinata anymore. She didn't sleep, she didn't eat, and as time passed she tended to forget what she was. If he reminded her she would remember, but forget again in a day or so. Naruto had stopped reminding her, it only made her sad and didn't change anything.

"Are you hungry, Naruto-kun? I could make you something."

"No, it's all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She paused and stood there. Most nights Hinata would spend her hours wandering the halls or staring out a window at the stars. Naruto usually avoided her during the nighttime. When he was alone

with her during those hours his instinct was to kiss her or hold her hand. The feel of her cold, lifeless skin made him ache. Sometimes he thought of ending the jutsu and letting her go. In many ways that would be the kindest thing. But if he did he wouldn't be able to summon her back again. She really would be gone forever.

Hinata began pressing her index fingers together and avoiding his gaze. "Naruto-kun? There's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Will we be staying in the village now? I love Oto, but this is home. You're Hokage and everyone acknowledges you. You've fulfilled your dream. Can we settle down now?"

"I'm still at war with Suna. A lot of the Leaf-nin have gone there as refugees. I have to deal with them."

"All right. Then after Suna?"

Naruto rubbed his hands together and shifted his weight from one foot to another. "After I destroy Suna I doubt the other Kages will feel very secure. I expect I'll have to go to war with them eventually."

"Then after you beat all the other ninja villages?"

"There are still samurai and the daimyos."

"Then after them?"

"Even if I conquer the Elemental Lands I'm sure there will still be revolts and people trying to kill me. There is always someone to fight."

Hinata lifted her gaze to look at him. "But we'll be able to settle down and start our family someday, won't we? I want to be a mother, and I know you would be a wonderful father. No matter what people say, I know you have a kind heart."

He breathed deep. "Of course, Hinata-chan. We'll find peace and have a family. But not right now. When the time is right we will absolutely have kids. You... you'll make a great mom."

"So, someday?"

Naruto nodded. "Absolutely, but it won't be anytime soon."

Hinata smiled at him. "That's fine, Naruto-kun. I'll wait." She paused, but Naruto didn't say anything. "Do you want to come up to the roof with me and look at the stars?"

"I'd love to, but I have a lot of work I need to take care of."

"All right then." Hinata gave him a pleasant wave and left.

Naruto headed to his office. He was determined to read every single report and fill out every last form. And if that wasn't enough he would review personnel files until morning.

When Sasuke finally returned to the Uchiha district the main gate was shut. The hinges had started to rust. There were faded signs posted all along the perimeter that read, 'This area off limits, by order of the Hokage.' Sasuke supposed he shouldn't have been too surprised. Danzou always loved to play up the history and traditions of the village. It made sense he would choose to keep the Uchiha district intact, rather than allow people to buy up the property and actually live there. Danzou had never trusted his clan while it existed. Once the Uchiha were gone he'd apparently loved them.

Sasuke carried a stack of folders with him. Before coming here he'd stopped by ANBU headquarters and visited the records office. He headed back to the small apartment where he'd lived. There was no electricity, but he'd kept a supply of candles. He was soon seated at his kitchen table going through the files. What he found was depressing, though not really shocking. Even before Naruto's arrival the village had really gone to hell.

"So the report was true, Naruto brought you back. Welcome home Sasuke."

Sasuke looked up, startled. Shikamaru was standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame. "Being dead has screwed up my senses. You never would have been able to surprise me like that before."

Shikamaru slid out a cigarette and lit it. "Don't be so sure, I can materialize any place with a big enough shadow. It's a terrific technique for spying missions or assassinations."

Sasuke leaned back in his chair. "That what you're here for? Come to assassinate me?"

"That would be sort of a waste, since you're already dead. Any way, you can't be killed, only sealed. We've had a lot of experience with edo tensei."

"I know," Sasuke waved at the folders in front of him.

"Those files are all marked top secret."

"It's okay, I have the Hokage's permission."

"Naruto's not Hokage."

"You want to tell him that?"

Shikamaru blew out a cloud of smoke. "And just what sort of reading material do you have?"

"Personnel files and mission reports. I wanted to see how many of my friends were still alive. But it looks like everyone except you and Sakura are dead."

"Sakura's probably dead too. She went to try and kill Naruto, right before your return."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. He'd hoped to talk to her. It was sad to think Naruto was the last living member of team seven. "Your idea?"

"No, hers. I told her not to bother, it would have been a better use of resources to try and gain his trust and spy on him."

"Naruto doesn't strike me as the trusting sort."

"He's not, but it still would have made a lot more sense than trying to kill him."

"If you didn't come to kill me why are you here, Shikamaru? You know Naruto is looking for you."

"Yeah, now that the Hokage is dead I'm his number one priority. I try and see it as an honor, a really, really troublesome honor."

Sasuke folded his hands in front of his face. "What is it you want?"

"To give you this." Shikamaru took a scroll from one of his jacket pouches and placed it on the table. "Don't worry, it's not booby trapped or anything."

Sasuke snapped the wax seal under his thumb and unrolled it. He took a minute to read the kanji, then gave Shikamaru a sharp glare. "How did you get this?"

"The Fifth acquired it, I never asked him where from. It was a tool to use against Naruto, for obvious reasons we couldn't deploy it. Until now."

Sasuke let the scroll roll itself back up. "You expect me to betray him."

"You can't betray someone who you don't owe any loyalty to. I am asking you to save this village, Sasuke. Fuck, I'm asking you to save the whole damn world. You're the only one who can now. You're the last chance we have."

"I'm not even sure this village is worth saving. I've read some of the mission logs. What Konoha did in Rice country..."

"Was just as bad as what Naruto did in Fire," Shika blew out another puff of smoke. "So what? We were at war. We did whatever we had to, to slow him down. We're ninja Sasuke, we are not nice people. If you read the mission reports from the Third Great Ninja War I doubt they'll be much different."

"I'm pretty sure no one ever slaughtered forty thousand people in one go during the last war."

"Only because they couldn't manage it. Us, Earth, and Wind all wiped out enemy towns and farming communities. It wasn't because of intent, it was just a matter of scale. Do you want to know what I'm most sorry about when it comes to what happened in Oto?"

"What?"

"That we didn't kill forty thousand and one."

"You're not much of a salesman."

"Hey, do you think I'm proud of what we did to the civilians in Oto and other places? I'm not. I'm not here to tell you we're the good guys in all this. I've been hip deep in blood since it started. There are no good guys here, Sasuke. But Konoha's still your home. Do you really want to see it destroyed?"

"Naruto's already won, he's not going to destroy the village."

"He will unless we accept him as tyrant, and we won't. Most of the shinobi would sooner see the village burn than let Naruto turn us all into slaves."

"Maybe that's what the village deserves." Sasuke pulled one folder out of the stack. "I know the truth about what happened during the Uchiha massacre. Itachi was ordered to betray the clan."

"Really?"

"Don't pretend you don't know!"

"I didn't. Why would I? I was a kid when that happened, remember? The same age as you. There was no reason why the Hokage would have told me about it later, I had no need to know."

"Why should I save this village when they destroyed my clan? Especially when there's not a single person I care about still living here?"

Shikamaru thought about it for a moment. "Hmmm, I guess from your point of view maybe there isn't. I mean if you're going to blame the village as a whole for the Uchiha massacre. But what about everyone else? How about the village of Suna? They ever do anything to you? Naruto's not making any secret he intends to wipe them out. He'd not interested in letting them surrender. And do you think it'll stop even then? Naruto has made the whole world his enemy. How many more thousands, hell, millions will he kill?"

"You want me to kill my best friend."

"He betrayed and killed you, not much of a friend."

"Technically, Orochimaru killed me, and you and Danzou betrayed me too."

"If you want to kill me for that go right ahead. But the fact is even if you don't give a damn about Konoha any more do you at least still care about the whole world? You're the only one who can save it."

Sasuke glanced at the scroll. "By turning traitor."

"You'd only be betraying one man. To the rest of the world you'd be a hero. Isn't that how you want the last Uchiha to be remembered?"

Sasuke gave him a stony glare.

Shikamaru finished his cigarette and dropped it on the kitchen floor. He stamped it out beneath his heel. "Well, in any case, think about it. But not for too long. Naruto plans to set out for Suna soon." Shikamaru stepped back into the darkened living room and melted into the darkness.

It was almost noon when Sasuke returned. He had a paper bag with him as he entered the Tower. The Oto-nin permitted him to go straight into the Hokage's office. Naruto was seated behind his desk going through personnel files.

Naruto looked up. "I was starting to wonder if you were coming back."

"I had a lot to think about. Here." Sasuke placed the bag on the desk. "Hope you haven't eaten yet."

"Ichiraku's? Wow, it's been awhile."

"Teuchi and Ayame are both still working there."

"I know, I checked on them as soon as the village was secure. I figured it was better if I not actually talk to them though." Naruto took the food out and stared at it.

"What are you waiting for? I can hear you drooling."

"I'd have to take my mask off."

"So? I don't have an appetite for you to spoil."

Naruto hesitated a bit longer, but finally took off his mask and dug in. Sasuke sat across from him and watched.

"Hey," Sasuke said. "You remember training for the finals of the Chunin Exams? Kakashi brought us out so we could do some hard core training as a team."

Naruto chuckled between slurping ramen. "Sure I do. Those were probably the hardest training sessions I've ever had in my life. Kakashi-sensei could actually be a real task master when he wanted."

"I remember lying on the grass, looking up at the stars, being dog tired. Just you, me, and Sakura. She said she was happy. That just being there as part of our team made her happy."

Naruto gave a slow nod and swallowed what was in his mouth. "I remember. Those were good times, all of us in team seven working together to reach our dreams."

"Tell me something, Naruto. At that time, before everything that happened at the finals, were you honestly happy?"

"Yeah, I was. But even then I knew it couldn't last. I didn't have any plans to abandon the village, but I wanted to become Hokage and to make the people suffer."

"Why?"

"Because of how I was treated all those years. Sarutobi was the only one I really cared about. I wanted to make him proud, but I wanted to make everyone else pay."

"I see." Sasuke sat there quietly until Naruto finished his food.

Naruto downed the last noodles with vigor. "That was good. I forgot just how much I love Ichiraku's."

"I know, I remember you told me once that is you were going to have a last meal you'd want it to be Ichiraku's ramen."

Naruto's red eyes met Sasuke's, which were also red. The two old friends looked at one another in silence.

"You're Hokage now," Sasuke said. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"I always thought it would be, but it's not that simple. The stronger you are the more desperate people are to bring you down. There's always one more enemy to fight, one more battle."

"You could stop."

Naruto shook his head. "I know there's no end to it, but it's not in me to quit." Naruto sagged in his chair. "I'm tired Sasuke, I'm sick of it. But I can't stand to let anyone beat me."

Sasuke gave a single, solemn nod. "I understand."

With his sharingan active Sasuke used the clan technique Shikamaru had provided him. He reached out and suppressed all of the Kyuubi's chakra. The moment that happened Naruto pitched face forward into his desk, knocking over the files. His body had come to depend on the red chakra. When it was suddenly caught off all the strength left him. Naruto couldn't even lift his head.

Sasuke stood over Naruto and took out a simple kunai. He stabbed down into his friend's neck.

Naruto felt the sharp pain and tasted hot blood in his mouth, he struggled to breathe as his own blood drowned him. He wasn't afraid. He'd beaten them, he'd made them kneel. He'd won.

He wondered if the old man would...

In her quarters Hinata felt a sudden weakness. She looked down and saw her hands and arms begin to crack and crumble. She remembered. Hinata closed her eyes and smiled. She remembered a young boy with a huge smile, and hoped where ever she went she would be with him. And that they would finally know peace.

Sasuke reached down and closed his friend's eyes. As his body began to crumble he waited to go back to the place he had been

before. "Goodbye."

Three Months Later

Shikamaru was in the Hokage's office half buried in paperwork and smoking like a chimney. He was Hokage now in everything but title. Shikamaru absolutely did not want to become the Sixth Hokage, but he was forced to wield authority in order to avoid total chaos within Konoha.

Leaf had won the war. With Naruto's death the Oto-nin had fled the village, knowing there was no chance they could hold it without the Oto-kage's power. Sasuke was a great hero and seen as the embodiment of the Will of Fire. There was a ten foot tall bronze statue of him next to the memorial. The traitors, like Tsunade, who had remained behind had been dealt with. The refugees from Suna had been welcomed home and the leaf village had started to rebuild. It should have been the beginning of a new and prosperous era.

But no sooner had Naruto's corpse gone cold than the trouble started. The Cadet Branch Hyuuga had declared themselves a separate clan and had occupied the Uchiha District. The Main Branch had tried to bring them back to the compound by force, resulting in bloodshed and casualties on both sides. Hanabi had come to a Council meeting screaming that the village force the cadet members back. There was no support among the rest of the village for that and Shika personally found the idea repulsive. Hanabi had then declared that if he and the rest of Konoha didn't help her restore her clan's rights she would lead the Main Branch members to Iwa. There was no way Shikamaru could allow that. He found himself seriously considering the same sort of solution for the Main Branch that had been used on the Uchihis.

Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the city was going slowly. The treasury was empty and no one was lending. The village was forced to decline a great many missions in order to keep a large reserve of ninja available for immediate deployment. Half the Leaf-nin had died

fighting Naruto. Iwa had immediately made an alliance with Oto and begun some incursions along the border. They weren't in a state of war yet. But it was coming. Mist was going through a new round of purges. Lightning had declared war on Waterfall. Suna had terminated their alliance and begun snapping up many of the jobs Leaf had been forced to turn down.

Many of the Leaf-nin who'd died had been their very best. Konoha's fighting power was a lot less than it had been. If a full scale war with Iwa and Oto started there was no guarantee they could win. The future was dark and there was no guarantee they would see the dawn.

"But we won," Shikamaru said out loud to the empty office. He lit another cigarette and got back to work.

THE END